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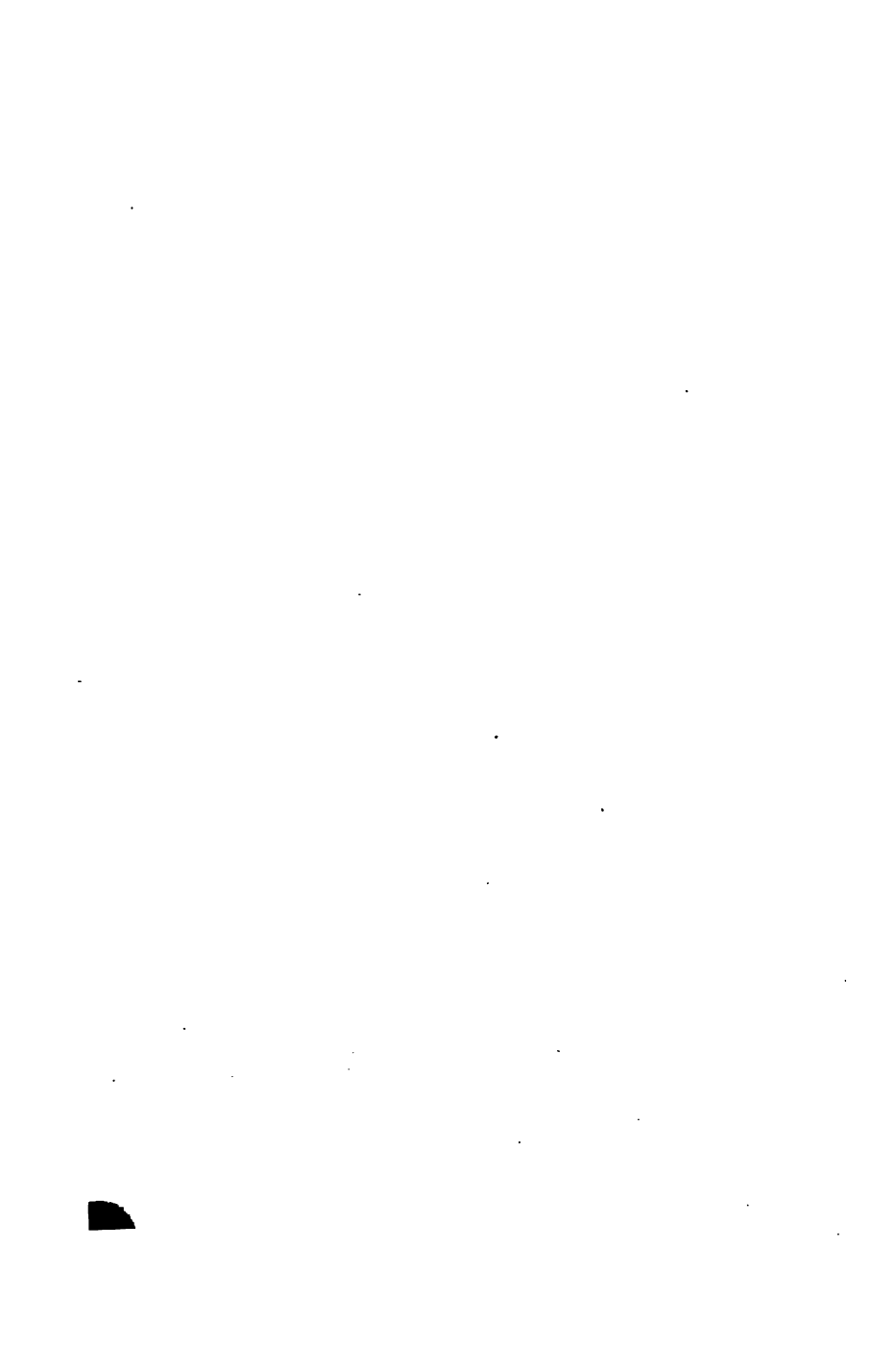
· ANNE RICHARDSON EARLE ·











HER GREAT AMBITION.

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BY

ANNE RICHARDSON EARLE.

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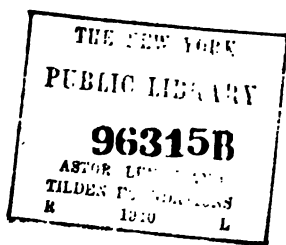


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HER GREAT AMBITION.

CHAPTER I.

A LONG June day was drawing to its close. The Verricks' tea-table was spread under the trees on the lawn, while near and about it three members of the family were preparing to partake of refreshment in unceremonious picnic fashion.

According to the given definition of the word "lawn," — "a surface of grass-ground kept smoothly mown *near* or in front of a residence," — such an ornament the Verrick estate might certainly boast. But one must at once disabuse the mind of the usual idea, wherein is pictured a green velvet sweep beginning at the foot of broad stone steps, and stretching away, its expanse broken only by the curve of the gravel drive, to where an outer wall, vine-covered and hedge-lined, intercepts the view. From the steps of the Verrick residence to the uncompromising enclosure which surrounded its ground, was but a stone's throw; whereas at the side and rear were several acres of the "grass-ground kept smoothly mown," with a tennis-court in one corner, and beyond, divided by a wicket, gardens both vegetable and flower, with tall hollyhocks upon either side, stately, stiff, and decorative. Still farther

beyond the garden lay the woodland, behind which the sun, about to set, threw back ruby rays over it all and into Augustine's kitchen, until she and it were both redly aglow.

The house was rather an elaborate affair, with an imposing façade, an arched carriage way, and many picturesque irregularities in the way of gables and turrets; but as the family income had dwindled from its former proportions, many of the rooms were disused. Mr. Verrick, who, like the boy in the nursery rhyme, "never made a bargain but he lost the half," had been involved, many years before his introduction here, in a law-suit regarding the acres which lay before his house on the farther side of what was now the road, and including the fields beyond down to the river. Certain of a decision in his favor, he had built his house and settled his family before the slow eye of the law had thoroughly viewed the case on every side. Imagine, then, his chagrin when, some years after its beginning, the suit terminated with a decision in favor of his opponent, and he found himself obliged to surrender his claim. His manner of receiving the disappointment was entirely characteristic. Firm as his belief had been in ultimate victory, he bore his defeat in absolute silence. One heard nothing further of the many proofs which he had before so often cited of his superior claim. He referred to the subject no more, and only showed his recognition of the adverse decision by the erection of a brick wall, very high and forbidding, covering the outside inch which he could legally control, thereby displaying before his successful opponent his entire indifference to the outer world, either as regarded his own enjoyment



of the now hidden prospect or its opinion of his newly finished mansion.

After the death of his wife, which occurred within a few years of the time of his legal defeat, Mr. Verrick lived almost entirely apart. He was a student by nature, and now his loneliness of heart found consolation only in study. His children—there were four of these young problems on his hands—grew up as best they might, the three younger away from home the greater part of the year. But he was at all times isolated, indifferent, absorbed in his books. During this summer afternoon he had been busy in his library with his microscope. The thermometer registered somewhere away up in the eighties, but he found no temptation to leave his labors; and even when at sundown his younger daughter announced to him that tea was to be served out of doors, he gave no further heed than an absent-minded request that they would not wait for him.

It was a mere form, this summoning the head of the house to his evening meal, and the messenger, not at all surprised at the result of her errand, took her way back to the party under the trees, dismissing the subject from her mind as a duty performed.

Sophy Verrick was a well-formed girl of medium height, with brown, curling hair, a sensitive, uncertain mouth, and a round child's chin with a dimple dotted upon it. She had also a good bright color, and was altogether an agreeable sight, as youth and abundant health always are. Now, as she passed along the veranda, she was enjoying the beauty of the green and the goodly prospect to the utmost of her capacity.

The sun had passed the height of its setting splendor. Away on the distant trees the shadows, all day blue and soft, had grown darker, and a reddish haze was falling over them. The garden was sending the perfume of grape-blossoms and roses across the grass upon the new breeze born but an hour before.

As Sophy joined the waiting group which animated the landscape, her spirits, which had been of rather a drooping character during all the long hot day, flew up to their customary level at a bound. "You look charmingly picturesque," she called out, approaching; "I have been admiring you immensely."

"I know what that means," said Rob, elaborately shielding as if from expected attack the pitcher in which he had been compounding lemonade, — "that compliment was intended especially for me."

"Modest, as usual," said Walter, laughing. "Where is father?"

"Not coming at present, — by and by perhaps."

"That means not at all, so I will make myself a shade more picturesque, if you please;" and so speaking, he extended himself with deliberation at full length upon the grass, and clasping his hands under his head, announced himself ready to be waited upon.

Walter Verrick was a young man who did nothing by halves. He was at home from the city for a vacation. Although he had established quite a reputation for active industry among his employers, and was the liveliest tennis-player in the club when he could be induced to play, he seemed to feel himself in duty bound to be idle during his summer leave, and had thus far systematically lounged away his time, to the

disgust or delight of his sisters as their demands were for his services or his society. In appearance he was blond and straight-featured, a little above the average height, extremely well proportioned, and quite sensitive as to the whiteness of a pair of muscular arms, which he was endeavoring by daily exposure to the sun to color to a more manly brown.

"I never saw any one who could keep a whole family busy as successfully as you, Walter," said Sophy, waiting on him and helping herself; "you ought to have a valet to take care of you."

"*A* valet!" cried Rob, with scornful emphasis on the indefinite article; "he would need twenty. You remind me, Walt, of those fellows who never do anything but throw bootjacks at their servants."

Walter acknowledged the compliment. "Rather warm work throwing bootjacks this weather," he said, enjoying his salad. "I would have two valets, and let them practise at each other."

Walter was the connecting link between the serious members of the family, as represented by his father and his elder sister Jessie, and the two younger ones, who had not as yet shown signs of any growing dignity. He had been the true leader of the Verrick flock ever since they had been settled together. He it was who adjusted family differences and arranged that the discovered needs should be provided for. This necessity for discretion had given him a gravity beyond his two-and-twenty years, but he had a sense of humor and love of fun which bound him still to the lightness of youth. To Jessie's care might be owing whatever regularity there was in the household, and to her example

might be traced whatever sense of propriety grew within its members. But to Walter they all looked ; he of them all could least be spared.

Jessie was the quiet member of the family. She had always remained under her father's roof, performing her educational duties regularly and conscientiously as was her nature in all things, and giving no moment's uneasiness to the methodical visiting-governess who instructed her, nor to the still resident Augustine, who looked after her physical well-being. Jessie followed Walter in point of age. She was fair, rather more slender than an exact proportion would have demanded, with a pair of light-blue eyes and a small, compressed mouth. Her quiet, even life had reinforced her natural peculiarities. Silence had become to her habitual, as well as a repose of manner founded upon serene self-approval.

Her sister Sophronia, on the contrary, had enjoyed none of the advantages of solitude. After their mother's death Sophy had been taken in charge by the aunt for whom she was named, — a capricious, uneasy lady, not always entirely judicious, under whose care her niece had travelled constantly, studied fitfully, read voraciously, and cultivated her taste for drawing as well as was possible on the wing. As a consequence of this training, or lack of it, the girl returned to her family, upon her aunt's rather tardy decision to marry, with a completed education which gave to them a bright, restless damsel with a moderate ability for sketching in color, a fair amount of general information, and a rooted aversion to doing any distasteful thing.

The memory of an enforced self-denial of that very day's occurrence brought even now a little sigh,

as she dismissed it for the twentieth time from her mind. Rob, noticing the sigh, felt called upon to explain its cause. Rob was the youngest of the family, with still two years of boarding-school before him, and was, as a consequence, the sharpest, the wisest, the most to be feared.

"Sophy's provoked," he declared, frankly, "because she cannot go to Frostmore to sketch."

"How did you know I was thinking of that?" she asked, amused.

"Oh! I knew by your expression that it was the heaviest of your tremendous sorrows, so it must be that. We were turned out of Frostmore this afternoon," he went on, looking alternately at Jessie and Walter: "Sophronia there, the persecuted artist, and I, her attendant knight, were politely requested to get out."

Jessie looked shocked. "How did it happen?" she asked. "I thought that Frostmore was open to every one."

"It always has been," answered Sophy, forgetting her supper; "but the man said that the family were expected soon, and ordered us off as if we were infected."

"Which we are not," cut in Rob, "with anything but genius; and there was no danger of his catching that."

"Even if the Frosts are coming," Sophy went on, not heeding him, "I should not interfere with them; the grounds are large enough for them and for me too."

"The grounds are large enough for all the beggars in town," said Walter; "but it is barely possible that the owners would rather have them to

themselves. The world must contain sketching material outside of Frostmore."

Sophy laughed and frowned at the same time. "It is not that," she answered, "but I have only half finished what I was at work on, and I do not want to give it up now."

"Never mind it," returned Walter, easily, passing his plate for a second supply of salad; "console yourself somehow. I daresay the people will not stay long; or if they do, we shall probably meet them, — and then you will be able to go about the place with the consent of its owner. I have seen Mr. Frost at the office two or three times; he seemed very pleasant with Mr. Marlowe."

"And not with you!" cried Rob, triumphantly; "Hur! too proud!"

Sophy gave him an approving nod. "Of course he is," she said. "He's old and crabbed, with a hooked nose and so much aristocracy that he might as well be frozen stiff! Not a drop of blood in his veins, only a little ice-water! I have seen hundreds of them; they are all equally self-satisfied and disagreeable."

"I do love an enthusiast," laughed Walter, "and you certainly head the list in that line, Sophronia. But it happens in this case you are wrong. Mr. Frost is neither disagreeable nor self-satisfied. But of course you do not care to hear."

"Walter Verrick," exclaimed Sophy, solemnly, casting down her empty plate with so little heed that Jessie hardly dared to hope for its safety, "if you know anything worth telling, I command you to tell it now; it will be the very first thing that I have heard for months that I did not know before."

"That is one of the disadvantages of being well informed. But I have nothing to tell, except that you are wrong in every particular; and I am afraid that that state of things would not be new enough to interest you. Mr. Frost is young and amiable, has blood in his veins and not the dropsy, is as rich as Cræsus and as handsome as Apollo, has so many estates that he cannot get around to them more than once in ten years, and — ahem! — chariots and horses, and jewels rare, and a wife, and I do not know how many children."

"What an exhaustive biography!" said Sophy, laughing; "I can easily believe myself an intimate friend of the family."

Then, without giving her brother time for further remarks, she arose, and stretching a pair of strong young arms toward his still recumbent figure, said, "Come with me as far as the garden; I have something to tell you."

He looked at her quickly and a little anxiously, but arose at once and accompanied her without a word. They walked slowly along side by side, leaving Jessie to see that her father's supper was carried to him and the tea-things properly consigned to Augustine's care. Rob, left alone, devoted himself for a while to the remains of the meal; after which he strolled off in search of other company, as he went calling back a not very flattering opinion of the deserters in the background, who were too deeply engaged by this time to notice so slight an interruption.

Walter, with folded arms, leaned against the little gate. His sister had seated herself upon the low stone wall near him, and was expressing her views with rather unusual earnestness and gesticulation.

"No one will see me," she said; "I have come out that way twice. The trees are all knots and stumps, and it is perfectly easy to climb. You see I cannot wait longer than to-morrow to finish it, or it will not be dry enough to send away on Thursday. Perhaps I may get enough for it to —"

He interrupted her with an impatient gesture. "I hate the idea of your painting for money," he said, rather sourly. "It is not necessary, and people make all kinds of remarks."

"What can they say, except that I want more money than I have; and as for that, who does not? Then too I may do something really fine some day. Every one used to tell Aunt Sophronia that I had remarkable talent."

Once more he broke in with impatience. "And Aunt Sophronia must needs tell you what they said; and the result is that you are altogether too unusual to behave like other girls. You must have aspirations and vocations. Nothing but an independent income will do for you, and you can go clambering over people's walls when they refuse admission at the gate, because of your superior genius! It is not worth while to say anything more. Even if I approved of your selling your work, I could not approve of your going to Frostmore again without the permission of its owner. So there is an end of it."

He spoke decidedly, perhaps a little savagely; but it was more in fear lest she should wheedle him into something like acquiescence than that he felt impatience with her. They never thought of consulting their father upon any of the minor problems of life, and Walter, as the judicial head of the family,

often felt an utter helplessness in dealing with this member of it. He always went armed to the teeth into any discussion with her, and he thought with dismay of the many times when against his will she had persuaded him into becoming her champion. Now, taking warning from such experience, he resolved to settle the question without giving her time for parley. As they talked, his resolution had been much fortified in noticing, with the surprise with which we mark some new point in a familiar object, how young and dependent she appeared, with her little curls and the childish frill about her throat. Indeed, he seemed to himself quite elderly, and was encouraged to believe that he should be able to hold his own.

"Then you advise me to give up painting," she said, with rising color.

"There you go, flying off to the other extreme! I do not advise anything of the kind."

"It amounts to the same thing. Unless I paint when I want to, there is no use in my trying at all. I can never do anything except when I am particularly in the mood for it."

"That is some of Aunt Sophronia's work! If you begin by believing such nonsense as that, you will not really try to do well more than half the time. The way to do is to persevere and keep at it, whether you want to or not; then you will do much better work, and grow rich much faster, if that is your object."

She was becoming angry, that was easy to see. Her color grew still warmer, and at the remark as to her becoming rich, which she felt to be a sneer at her desire for independence, a little light, as sharp

and fine as a needle's point, flashed at him from her eyes.

Seeing this, he girded himself for a final blow, which should settle the matter beyond question. "You are angry," he said, stiffly, "because I do not agree with you. That is always the way, I believe, with those who ask advice. They do not want advice at all; they only want to hear themselves argue, and strengthen their own opinion. As for your going on any such expedition as you propose, the finest thing that you could possibly turn out would not make it worth your while. So you will not think of it, will you?"

He softened a little at the end, and reached a persuasive hand toward her nearest shoulder. But she arose, and stood beyond his touch. That second showing of the light regard in which he held her powers had thoroughly aroused her wrath.

"I shall promise nothing," she cried, keeping a disdainful distance between them.

"You must," he insisted, unwisely.

"I tell you that I will not," she retorted; "I would go now, if it were only to prove to you that I can do as I choose."

"You shall not go without permission," he said, with determination; "I will prevent it."

"We shall see," she returned, loftily; and with a parting fiery glance she walked away to the house and to her room, leaving her brother to wonder whether discretion would not have been in this case, as in many another, the better part of valor.

CHAPTER II.

THE following morning was well advanced before Sophy made her appearance in the deserted breakfast-room. The distant sound of continued arpeggios announced sufficiently her sister's whereabouts, and she learned incidentally from Augustine that the boys had started early on a fishing excursion. She was quite at a loss to account for this state of things, and as she abandoned the air of frigid stateliness with which she was prepared to confront her recent opponent and ate her breakfast, she speculated not a little upon his absence. Walter was one to keep his word; and furthermore, these all-day fishing-tramps of which Rob was so fond had not been to his taste of late. What could it mean? Was Augustine sure that *both* the boys had gone for the day? Augustine was sure. Then Sophy could arrive at but one conclusion. Walter had decided to surrender at discretion, and had taken himself off, that he might thereafter appear to believe himself victorious. Strong doubts as to the probability of this explanation arose within her; but she silenced them, and finishing her meal hastily, slung her compactly stored sketching implements over her shoulder and set forth toward the forbidden goal.

It was as warm a morning as had been that season, and she would have thought work of any kind out of the question had it not been that the glow of her anger had ignited the fire of her genius, placing even the sun's fierce strength beneath consideration. She walked firmly down the baking road under a big umbrella, sharing the resolution of the bees and butterflies, who only, beside herself, showed indifference to the attractions of shade and inertia.

It was not a long walk to the main entrance of the Frostmore ground; one had only to follow the straight road for half a mile. But to reach the rear of the enclosure one must take a roundabout and devious way, and cover a distance three times as great. Sophy crossed a field where the mowers had been at work, and the air was full of the scent of the new hay. She kicked her feet against the dry stub-grass as she walked, and watched the short, whirring flight of the startled grasshoppers. At length she pushed her way through a growth of thick young bushes, and the river lay before her, its placid water almost black where it was shaded, — a liquid, mysterious blackness, which melted into olives and browns, finally losing itself in the clear reflection of green outlines and the perfect blue of the summer sky. She stood for a few moments in a shady spot and admired it all. A company of water-spiders which had gathered in a mass near the bank, skated jerkily hither and thither on their little threads of legs. Slender darning-needles of iridescent blue hovered about the overhanging bushes and the flags beneath, while the invisible locusts sang their tireless, persistent chorus from the trees. She gathered a few cardinal flowers and adorned her belt with their

perishing glory as she walked on, until finally a corner of the Frostmore enclosure appeared ; then, but a short distance farther, and she again came to a standstill and looked about her. Before her was a thick, exclusive-looking wall, beside which grew a maple-tree with low-spreading limbs, easy of ascent by consequence of its nearness to the stump of a departed companion, which afforded an excellent start. From the lower elevation she was enabled to place her sketching materials on the top of the wall ; after which she shot her umbrella far over into the invisible, and proceeded with determination to mount aloft. The struggle was laborious and by no means graceful ; but her efforts were rewarded at last by a rather uncertain kneeling position beside her box and easel. The tree by which she must descend within grew several yards farther along, so she collected her possessions and arose to her feet, and keeping her eyes well upon the broad stone coping before her, arrived safely within reach of the friendly branches. To circulate about in a tree with any degree of confidence even the most experienced performer requires, as a rule, the full complement of arms and legs ; yet this novice, handicapped as she was, succeeded in accomplishing the perilous feat, reaching the ground a little suddenly perhaps, but certainly unhurt.

Making sure that no mortal was near, she took her way toward the little lake, which lay before her in all the beauty of its midsummer surroundings. But oh, the heat ! She took off her hat and fanned herself with it, after preparing to begin her work. How still it was ! She smiled amiably to herself. One might as well be in the desert, as far as solitary

safety was concerned. Even as the thought crossed her mind, the sound of a light footstep struck a withering terror to her very heart.

"Hullo!" called a friendly voice, and the small body of its owner drew up beside her. It was that of a handsomely dressed boy of about seven years, who gazed upon the trespasser with an interest unmixed with the smallest surprise or embarrassment.

"How do you do?" she retorted at length, rescuing her animation from the paralysis which seemed to benumb it.

"I have come to see your picture," he went on, in no way disturbed by his indifferent reception.

She reached forward mechanically, and held the small plaque toward him.

"Why that is splendid!" he cried, looking at it critically; "a great deal better than Minna can do." Then, after a pause, he added frankly, displaying his desire to impart his small stock of information, "Why don't you say, Who is Minna?"

"Who is Minna?" she asked, obediently, about to add, "and who are you?" when he continued, satisfied, "Minna is our governess; she teaches us. I hate her," he added, sweetly; "so does Lolly. Lolly is my brother, his name is Lawrence. My name is Roger,—Roger Frost. What is your name?"

"How did you come here?" she inquired, not heeding his question; "was any one with you?"

"No one was with me; I came alone. I ran away."

"Where from?"

"From the house. I was tired of playing all alone. What is your name?"

Almost reassured, she allowed herself to display more interest than she had yet dared. "My name is Sophronia," she admitted, beginning to sketch rapidly.

"M—m!" dubiously,—"not a very nice name: think it is?"

"No, indeed; I think it perfectly dreadful."

The frank admission pleased him. "So do I," he said, confidentially, looking up at her as he lay upon the ground at her side. "Do you know that the world is round?"

She paused in her work to look down into the handsome little face. "Are you sure that it is not square?" she asked.

"Yes, it is round. And you think that it stands still, don't you?"

"Of course the world stands still."

"No, it does not; it keeps turning over and over like lightning, and half the time you are wrong side up, only you do not know it."

Sophy could only give him a little incredulous look in the midst of her laughter, while he went on, delighted with his own power of instruction. "I study geography, so I know all about it. When I know all the capitals, my papa is going to give me a watch. I do not know any yet, excepting Paris. Have you ever been there?"

"Never."

"What! why we have all been there. I went to erpreesherate my advantages, but papa says I did not. My tongue will not speak French. Can you speak French?"

"Yes, a little."

There was a short silence, during which Sophy

painted quietly, and her companion watched her brush with interest. At his next words the smiles called forth by his friendly confidences faded from her lips, and the busy brush came to a standstill.

"That was your umbrella that came over the wall, was n't it?" he asked, innocently. "It hit my papa in the back. He did n't care, though; he thought that it was yours."

There was no need to counterfeit amazement now. "What do you mean?" was all that she could say, while her companion, in delight at having so excellent a listener, rattled volubly on.

"Manson said that you had been here, and he told you not; and papa said it was n't right, Manson, and Manson said it was orders; and then the umbrella came over the wall, and papa made us all go away; and he told Manson and James that they must not come here again to-day, and he told me that I must go to the house; but then the doctor came, and I ran away back here."

"You should not have run away from the doctor," she said, putting her belongings hastily together. "I must leave you now, and you must go back to him."

"But he did n't come to see me," urged the child, "he came to see one of the men; and, oh, I wish that you would n't go! You have not been here a second yet, and I am all alone. If you will only stay until they come to find me, I will not tease another bit. Mamma will be sure to miss me as soon as the doctor goes."

But she only hastened the more, her young friend backing before her in unheeded beseeching.

Arrived at the wall, she stopped suddenly. The indignity of the act of climbing rendered it not to

be thought of while under the scrutiny of those sharp eyes.

"Good by," she said, looking uneasily behind her. "You must come and see me some day at my house, and I will let you paint."

If she expected that the splendor of this promise would dazzle him for one second into inattention, she was mistaken. He stood immovable, his hands behind his back, staring at the wall.

"I shall be sure to come," he said; "but how are you going to get over there?"

"That is a secret," she answered, cheerfully; "should not you like to run to the house now?"

"No, I should like to stay here."

This sounded unpromising; but she returned desperately to the charge. "I will tell you what we can do. Turn your back, so, and put your hands over your eyes; then, when you have counted a hundred, turn around and try to find me."

"No, you will be gone far away."

"Oh, indeed, I shall not! After you have looked for me, if you cannot see me, call, and I will speak to you. Now begin! count slowly;" and without giving him time to think of objecting, she precipitated herself into the low branches of the tree.

She had already accomplished half the journey toward descent and safety, when she beheld a sight which fairly deprived her of her remaining breath. In the foreground below her stood the small blue-clad figure, its face honestly covered by its hands, counting in loud, monotonous sing-song, "Eighty-seven, eighty-eight, eighty-nine, *ninety!*" and beyond it, advancing full upon it, in company with two strange gentlemen, walked her own father.

Smash! went her precious porcelain on the top of the wall; but she never heeded it. With one last despairing glance at the poor little friend whom she was deserting, she turned, and regardless of consequences, threw herself down into the road without.

The day was going. A dreary, interminable day it had seemed, without one feature to recommend it to a solitary young lady. Sophy Verrick lunched in the early afternoon alone, as she had breakfasted. Later in the day arrived a caller; but Sophy, being out of sorts, declined to appear.

"People ought to know better than to call in such weather as this," she said, in answer to Jessie's remonstrance; "I shall not encourage it."

"But you did not see her the last time she called," urged Jessie. "I am sure it must be harder for her to come to see us than it is for us to receive her. Then too she is such a good girl."

"I know that, but it does not make the day any more endurable;" and so saying, Sophy turned the plump lounge-cushions to their cooler side and replaced herself upon them, as one whom no amount of persuasion could move.

At last, after further hours of desultory reading, dozing, and fanning, the obnoxious sun showed symptoms of decline. Then, dressing herself in her freshest, thinnest gown, Sophy wandered down through the garden toward the woods, where, to her secret joy, she met the boys returning, brown and dusty, from their tramp.

"We have walked twenty miles," called Rob, with pride. "We followed the river around, and came home this way."

"What did you catch?"

"I caught two pickerel: we had those for dinner. Walt did not catch anything."

Sophy glanced curiously at her older brother out of the corners of her eyes. He appeared so smilingly indifferent that she was quite at a loss. Still, she was delighted to see him, and if Walter would be friends she was willing enough; but the reconciliation should be brought about by no false understanding between them.

"It has been stupider than you can imagine all day," she said. "I was busy sketching in the morning," with another little glance, "and it was such an effort that I have not recovered from the effect of it yet; but I am ready to kill the fatted calf for you, I am so rejoiced at your arrival."

Walter laughed very naturally. "A flattering allusion," he said. "Have you been at Frostmore?"

She nodded toward him with as fine a show of good-nature as his own.

"You found it pleasant then? You were not disturbed?" This he asked, or rather asserted, with the air of a reigning sovereign.

"That I was," she answered, her cheerful smile tempered with a touch of anxious retrospect.

Walter started perceptibly. "I was told," he said, quite fiercely, "that you would be entirely welcome."

"You! You went to Frostmore?"

"Certainly. I told you that you should not go there without the owner's consent, so I went and obtained it. Mr. and Mrs. Frost were so pleasant about it that — There they are now;" and in fact

there they were, turning in at the gate, in Mr. Verrick's company.

Sophy would gladly have fled ; but as her father, in pointing out the beauties of his domain, had seen them and signalled them with his stick, she dared not indulge her preference.

" You must come with me," she said to Walter, who willingly piled his share of traps on the unresisting Rob and accompanied her. He bowed stiffly to the visitors and presented them formally to Sophy, without waiting for his father to officiate, — which was perhaps as well ; for Mr. Verrick seemed to imagine in his absent way that everybody must know his children, and rarely remembered to the contrary in time to make it at all worth while.

" You must allow me to apologize for having frightened you this morning," said Mr. Frost, with courtesy. " I had come to assure you of your welcome, and believed that as your father was with me you would understand the situation at a glance."

He spoke with an even, matter-of-fact manner, and she could not but feel grateful for the entire oblivion into which he seemed to have cast the mode of her escape. Walter stood by with his coldest, most Napoleonic expression. Sophy must say something, and without delay.

" I should not have been afraid," she explained, with bright frankness, " if I had been sure that I was doing right. I did not know that my brother had obtained permission for me to be where I was, so I believed myself a trespasser."

" I am more annoyed than I can express that you should have been interfered with at all," said Mrs.

Frost, seriously. "A little authority in unaccustomed hands is very apt to be used for the sake of displaying it. Is it not so?"

She turned to Walter as she spoke, who, understanding more of the state of affairs than he had previously been able to do, and seeing with pleasure their visitors' cordial bearing, thawed once more into flesh and blood.

"But you are avenged, Miss Verrick," Mr. Frost continued, smiling. "Your enemy was this morning exercising his authority upon one of the horses to which he was strange, and has been badly punished. Your father has spent the greater part of the morning in attending to the man's injuries, and the afternoon in driving with my friend Mr. Lanman and myself, to make known to us the country about; for which," he added, with a courteous little inclination toward his host, "I have still to thank him sufficiently."

Mr. Verrick himself had said little or nothing during this time. Sophy knew that there was in his mind a salutary lecture for her when the occasion should present itself. But she was equally sure that could she arrange her outgoings and incomings with fortune at all in her favor, the subject would be forgotten by him before he would have the opportunity to express himself. That he had been summoned to attend the suffering groom was not a surprise to her, for although he made no effort and indeed had no desire for medical practice, he had when a young man taken his degree in medicine, — a fact very well known about the neighborhood, and often taken advantage of by those who, for whatever reason, found it inconvenient to send to an adjoining town

for a regular practitioner. By his superior knowledge and gentle kindness he did much good to those about him, although little pecuniary benefit accrued to himself, as he invariably forgot to send an account, and the number of those who would demand and insist upon its presentation was comparatively small.

Before Mr. Frost took his leave, Jessie dutifully made her appearance, followed shortly by Rob, freshly washed, and with a hungry eye which no amount of civil endeavor could disguise. Discovering this, perhaps, Mrs. Frost suggested to her husband the propriety of their departure.

"I am very glad to know you," she said, addressing both the sisters. "We are such entire strangers here that it is pleasant to have an opportunity of making friends with any of our neighbors so soon; and I hope that you are not entirely prejudiced against our home, Miss Sophy. The grounds are always at your service, and the house is ready to welcome you. We expect friends very soon, and then there will be much going on which you may enjoy."

After the guests had gone and while the Verricks were taking their belated meal together, they discussed their new friends freely. All admired them. From Jessie to Rob, each found something which appealed to his or her especial taste. How enchanting Mrs. Frost had been. To each as she spoke she had conveyed that idea of individual interest which constitutes the most delicate kind of flattery. And it had been so civil in her to come to them at once. It had taken all the sting from Sophy's adventure, and left only a sense of good fortune.

“You see,” she said, happily, to Walter, “that my going to Frostmore did no harm after all. They mean to like us.”

“Right you are,” cried Rob, colloquially. “There will be plenty of fun, and we shall be in it.”

CHAPTER III.

THE Verrick sisters sat together in the well-worn family sitting-room, preparing gala gowns for an event. The only member of the household who claimed no share in this cosmopolitan apartment was Mr. Verrick, and he rarely even entered it. Once in a long time he would come among his children and stand upon the rug before the fireplace talking with Walter or Jessie, the others being in his estimation still too juvenile to comprehend.

But with this single exception every one was here represented. Walter's book-case and desk stood between the windows, — the books principally of an instructive nature; the desk with pigeon-holes well stuffed with pamphlets upon finance, the care of property, and various questions of law, in the study of which his conscientious brain had struggled for the power to care for and protect those for whom he long before had begun to feel himself responsible. There was a scroll-saw and various other straggling property belonging to Rob, and a work-table owned by both the girls, wherein the partnership consisted to a large extent in Jessie's putting to rights continually, and Sophy's reducing again to confusion. There was even a cushion in one corner for Noah, the old cat, — so named in his infancy as being the only one saved from the flood.

The room itself was bright and cheerful, despite the fact that the furniture was by no means new, and that little constellations of spots caused by ink, hot sealing-wax, and numerous unrecognizable compounds were rather prevalent upon the table-cloth. But the windows were broad and high and airily draped, and there were plenty of pictures, a screen, an immense lounge with no less than four cushions, and a capacity for affording luxurious positions unequalled by any other one lounge extant. It was never left long in lonely idleness, this valued friend. Three out of the four habitual occupants of the apartment relieved each other in a perpetual repose upon it, and its peaceful old frame bore testimony to the fact of its having been the object of many a lively skirmish for its possession and enjoyment.

To-day, however, the lounge was experiencing a holiday; for the caller whose attention Sophy had so depreciated a few days before had indeed come with an object, — that of bidding the Verrick household to a fête which she, Miss Simcoe, aided and abetted by her parents, purposed in the near future to offer for the enjoyment of her friends.

“How long do you think it is since we have either of us had a perfectly new dress?” said Sophy, pushing her work from her and throwing herself comfortably back in her chair. “Can you remember?”

“Not exactly, perhaps,” answered Jessie, sewing busily, “but not so very long, I should think.”

It was one of the most marked differences between the girls that whereas Jessie had a great deal of pride, and even before her sister disliked to refer to the many little artifices to which their moderate circumstances reduced them, Sophy cared never a whit,

and would as willingly as not make any one acquainted with the whole catalogue of their expedients, should the conversation chance to lead in such a direction.

"I do not know what you call 'very long,'" she said, eying the result of her recent labor with meditative eyes. "I have worn that gauze since the summer before last without a change, and it was made from two dresses then. However, the ribbons are new, that is one comfort. I wish the dress were nothing but ribbons; then I should be all new for once, at least."

There was no reply to this aspiration, so after a few moments of thought Sophy spoke again.

"I am afraid," she said, calmly, "that the trouble with us is that we can do so well upon nothing. People who have that faculty never get on. They live in shabby respectability all their days, as we are doing, and never have a thing until they need it so that they are too far beneath their average to be able to get along without it. I hate that way. I like to be frivolous, — to have my own money, and then decide how far it will go, and what to do with it. Should you not like to have an independent fortune? Or do you never think of it?"

"I never think of it; but it would be very pleasant if it came."

"It is not likely to come, unless you make it. There is your music. You might become a fine musician, and then you could earn your own living, and no one could control you, — unless you married," she added, scornfully, as an afterthought.

"If I were obliged to choose between earning my living by my music and marrying, I am afraid that I

should have to marry," said Jessie, "even at the risk of your disapproval."

Sophy regarded her compassionately for a moment, and then abandoned the incomprehensible subject. "As for me," she said, "I mean to do something before I die which shall make me a name, and give me independence too."

Jessie looked uncomfortable. "If you had money," she said, with more interest than she usually considered it worth while to bestow upon a conjectural case, — "if you were to have a fortune left you, what would you do with it?"

"Ah," sighed the younger, "what would n't I do! I would have a studio in the very centre of the city, and there I would live by myself. Whenever I chose I would take long sketching trips with my teacher, who should be the very best instructor to be had. Perhaps I would have one or two woman friends, but they should be artists, and not in the habit of giving advice. And I would travel. I would sail down the Mediterranean in my own yacht, and oh, the delicious, balmy air, and the lovely twilights! Don't you see," she cried, enthusiastically, "that the way to live is to be able to enjoy *things*, and not to mind about *people*?"

Jessie continued her work and answered with contrasting calmness: "It is fortunate for you," she said, "that you are likely to have nothing. If you were to act after any such insane plan as you propose, you would have no friends, — which would be much worse than having no money."

"Such friends as I wanted I should have; they would approve of me."

"No one would approve of you whose opinion

would be worth having. Some people might pity you, perhaps."

"Pity me! Able to travel all over the world, and perhaps to become a celebrated artist! I should think that they would be more likely to pity you, married to some insignificant man, and living in a little dot of a town, with a calling acquaintance of a half-dozen other people whose experiences were exactly like your own."

"You talk like Aunt Sophronia," said Jessie, surrendering the contest with a sigh; "but you will outgrow that in time."

Sophy arose and strolled to the window, with no trace of her former animation. "It is n't going to rain, after all," she said, ignoring the past discussion; "and in that case neither the boys nor I shall be at home to supper. I am to meet them at the river at half-past five, which reminds me to go and see what Augustine has for us to eat."

Augustine, as one accustomed, submitted meekly to the sack of her premises, and agreed willingly enough as one discovered dainty after another was demanded, until the small but evidently travelled basket was filled with eatables and borne triumphantly away upon Miss Sophy's round arm.

Sophronia crossed the fields slowly, and entered the narrow river path in the direction of Frostmore. A small boat was drawn up by the bank before her. A bare brown muscular arm was holding it where it lay, while its owner talked with a gentleman not aquatically clad, who stood in the path, — Mr. Frost.

He turned at the sound of her approach, and came towards her.

"What an agreeable surprise!" he said, cordially.
"I hope that you are not entirely bent on solitude."

Sophy laughed, and disclaimed any such purpose.

"Then I will venture to present my friend Mr. Lanman," he said, "if you will allow me to present him while he is so unpresentable."

As the boatman turned his smiling face toward her she recognized him, in spite of the entire difference of costume, as the second gentleman who had been in her father's company within the Frostmore grounds on that morning of overwhelming memory when she had scaled the wall. With a heightened color she returned the greeting of her new acquaintance, and hastily addressed herself once more to Mr. Frost.

"Have you seen a water-sprite pass by?" she asked him, about to continue her walk.

"Not unless I see one now," he answered, readily;
"and she seems about to pass, I am sorry to say."

His manner had a touch of friendly compliment in it which was also expressed in the boatman's face as he looked at her over his shoulder. Thus reassured, she lingered for a moment in explanation.

"The 'Water-sprite' is our boat," she said. "The boys, my brothers, have gone out in her to shoot. They are to meet me here, and we are to row over to the Willows and have our supper."

"Ah, a picnic!" ventured Lanman; "I like picnics." He was still looking at her over his shoulder, with so little of horrified recollection in his expression that she forgave his involuntary knowledge sufficiently to make him a direct reply.

"I thought that gentlemen always hated picnics," she said, with a half-incredulous smile.

"Once, some time ago, I believe I did think them rather dreary; but I have changed. You know people often change completely."

"Do they often change very completely in five minutes?" Mr. Frost asked, appealing to her.

"Not often, perhaps," she answered, more at her ease; "but you see it might happen — it has in this case. I should be delighted if you would both accept an invitation to supper with us, only I warn you that all the provisions are contained in this little basket, and the days of miracles are over."

"Confidentially, Miss Verrick," said Mr. Frost, "both Mr. Lanman and I are expected to dine at home. We cannot remain to disturb you, selfishly glad as we might be to do so;" and to this decision both gentlemen adhered, even when the boys arrived presently and repeated their sister's invitation.

The "Water-sprite" was a broad-backed, substantial-looking boat, as like to Lanman's graceful outriggered gig as a bull-dog is like a greyhound. Sophy looked admiringly after it as it darted farther and farther from them down the river, and then swept a comprehensive glance along the bulging outlines of their own craft.

"Why do people ever build ugly things when it is just as easy to build pretty ones?" she said.

Walter laughed. "Are you wishing that the 'Sprite' was like that?" he asked, nodding toward the still receding gig. "I'm afraid if it were, some one would have to get out and walk. Beauty is delightful; but once in a while it is necessary to have a useful thing or two, just to set off the others, you know."

"Now, no discussions," cried Rob, recognizing the germs of an argument. "You two are getting to be a regular pair of wranglers, and you'll take away my appetite."

"If I thought that I could accomplish that, I would keep it up," returned Sophy, laughing; "we have quite a nice supper, and I am hungry enough to eat your share, I know."

Little preparation was necessary for these domestic affairs. The soft, thick grass, with the fragrance of the willows and the rushes, and the changing light from golden blue to pink and lavender sunset tints: so far all was prepared. Their part consisted only in selecting a comfortable position, uncriticised, however unconventional, followed by intermittent dips into the opened basket packed discriminatingly with regard to such unpacking, — sandwiches at the top, olive-bottle in the corner, cake, tarts, and cheese at the bottom. Ah, how thoroughly they enjoyed it all!

"Thank goodness, our guests declined our invitation!" said Rob, devouring the last crumb. "Let's go up and shoot for a while. I'll bet Soph can't break the olive-bottle in three shots."

"I would n't talk," said Walter, rising and laughing; "you missed everything you tried for this afternoon."

"So did you, — I mean, so *would* you if you had tried. I'll take the gun; come on."

"You're sure you left the boat all right?" Walter said to his sister, hesitating, as they turned together through the clearing.

"Oh, yes, indeed!" she answered, pulling him along. "Don't waste daylight going to look; I tied it tight, it could n't get away."

"Ah, luckless speech and bootless boast!"

For the "Water-sprite," endowed, perhaps, in this particular in proportion as it was lacking in others, had not only found it possible to get away, but had availed itself of that possibility, and was at that very moment drifting gently with the stream far below the point of willows.

Lanman, pulling lazily up toward Frostmore half an hour later, was surprised, and at first alarmed, at meeting the empty boat sidling independently along in the swiftest of the current. But a second's thought showed him what the circumstances must be. Both pairs of oars were firmly stowed, and Miss Verrick's red cloak lay in a little heap on the bow seat, exactly where he had seen her throw it. There could have been no accident; the boat must have gone adrift.

Not without some danger of upsetting, and only after a great deal of skilful manœuvring, was Lanman able, by soft, judicious pushes of the gig's sharp bow, to turn the "Water-sprite" from her course and coax her toward the bank. It was impossible for him to secure her in any way; but having lodged her as firmly as he could, he started with accelerated speed up the river in pursuit of her late occupants.

Lanman had felt more interest in the Verrick picnic than it was at all proper that he should display in his courteous refusal to be of it. How would they amuse themselves, these three? What good times they must have together! Quite an Elysium their lives appeared, from the standpoint of a sisterless, brotherless wanderer who might view them only from afar; now, however, he had an excuse for intrusion among them, of which he was swiftly taking advantage.

He was barely in time. Even as he came in sight of the thin groups of willows with the clearing beyond, three dejected figures were already turning back from the water's edge. At the sound of his shrill whistle, however, they paused and turned again, and in a minute more he was within speaking distance.

"I met your boat," he called, — "she is safe; but I could n't get her up here. I can take you down, though, one at a time."

Walter thanked him warmly. "It was awfully stupid of us to lose the boat," he said, "and awfully kind of you to catch it. But we will not trouble you further; we are going down to the bridge to cross. It is not very far."

"Don't do anything of the kind," urged Lanman, anxiously. "This boat was made to carry two; she is not nearly so cranky as she looks. There is a coxswain's seat, you see. If you will pull in on the oar and then hold her steady, any one can get aboard. If your sister will come, I can easily land her at the Frostmore float, where there will be help. It would surely be a very wet walk for her to the bridge."

"It looks as if it would be a wetter ride to Frostmore," Sophy answered; "but I should like to try it."

She looked inquiringly at Walter. She was in an unusually humble mood just then, owing to her recent misfortune with the boat. "I should like it," she repeated, with another wistful, half-excited glance; and her brother's objections died on his lips.

"Give my love to the mermaids," whispered Rob, suggestively, bracing himself and taking her hand

as she prepared to descend. Lanman being comparatively helpless, it required the combined strength and ingenuity of the other three to accomplish the transfer; but with a strong hold on the outrigger and a firm hand to assist the coxswain over the side, the gig was at last freighted and headed down the river, — not without many injunctions from Walter to his sister as to perfect immobility and obedience, and assurances from Lanman that there was not the slightest danger of mishap.

“I dare not turn my head nor wave my hand,” she said, with a subdued laugh. “Are they looking yet? Do they see how well we are doing? Oh, it was I,” she added, remorsefully, “who let the boat get away! And now they have to walk so far, while I fly. It is not fair; I know that it is not. They would either of them enjoy this as much as I.”

“I would gladly have gone back for them if they had been willing to wait. They can have the boat any time they want it; I will tell them so. I am very glad that you enjoy it.”

“It is so frightful, so uncertain, who could help enjoying it?”

He laughed. “Is that your idea of enjoyment,” he asked, — “terror and uncertainty?”

“Yes, I think so, — it is one idea of it, at least. Anything unusual is interesting to me. You must remember,” she added, with a little philosophical touch which surprised him, “that it is not every one who has the strength of character to enjoy the most enjoyable things of life in the best way.”

He was pulling very gently, and the current was doing the rest. In spite of the dampness and the gray dusk, he would not hasten. There were a

thousand questions in his mind which he would have liked to put to her. But he rejected them all, and it was she who questioned him.

"You swim, do you not?" she at length asked, very naturally.

"Oh, certainly!" he answered. "And you?"

"Not a stroke. If ever I decide to drown myself, I shall have no opportunity to change my mind."

"If you only remember one or two simple things, you cannot sink."

"Excuse me, but that is just what I can do, no matter how many things I remember."

"You should throw back your head and keep your arms close at your side."

"And if I were to do that should I surely float?"

"Surely."

"Very well; I may try it some day, and if I drown I shall know that you were mistaken."

There was a little laughing pause, after which he easily led her on to telling him of her family, — of her father and his retired life; of the boys and her affection for them; and of Jessie, upon whose good qualities she expatiated at length. "My sister is really *too* good," she concluded, naively; "although if one must have a fault, I suppose it had better be that than anything else."

The Frostmore boat-house showed itself all too soon for Lanman's satisfaction, for he was being so thoroughly entertained as to have even forgotten his lack of consideration in keeping his host's dinner waiting. He easily landed his passenger, with the boatman's help, and then putting on a light jacket, and giving directions to the man as to pursuit of the

vagrant boat, he continued his *rôle* of escort across the fields and along the road to the Verrick house.

But the charm of his companion's late confidence was broken, and he learned but one other fact which he found especially interesting.

She was to be a guest at Mrs. Simcoe's garden-party, whither he also was bidden ; but to this she added the astonishing information that she considered social entertainments a great waste of time, especially for those happy persons who had higher objects in view.

And with this new and unexpected opinion he was obliged to leave her.

CHAPTER IV.

THE Simcoe vines and fig-trees were adorned with countless Japanese lanterns, while from an ornamental bower behind the house a half-dozen musicians discoursed the newest waltzes and promenades to the assembled guests.

The house itself was a model of festive hospitality. Every window and door was flung widely open, admitting the soft, music-laden air; the supper-room, in all its showy bravery, stood a ready sacrifice to the destroying hand of whosoever would.

Mrs. Simcoe and her daughter had been engaged in receiving their guests for more than two hours; and now the fashionably late, as well as the eagerly early, had presented themselves, and entered upon an evening of delight or boredom, as their individual predisposition should be influenced by happy fortune or hard fate. Among those young ladies whose lines had fallen in pleasantly masculine places was Miss Verrick. Hardly had she left the clasp of Miss Simcoe's welcoming hand when she was accosted by a youth of vaguely familiar appearance, who, entirely unconscious of his vagueness, conversed volubly, danced acceptably, and obtained her permission to present two of his friends. Then Mrs. Simcoe sought her out, escorted by a tall man with a

collar of extra-holiday discomfort, who was obliged to await his turn for a waltz ; after which the vague young gentleman appeared again.

Miss Sophy Verrick meanwhile was evading all engagements with surprising adroitness. She clung fast to Walter, whose presence at the fête was also a duty rather than a pleasure. Twice they had danced together, and now, at his suggestion, they strolled from the house and across the dimly lighted lawn, where, encountering an unemployed waiter, they were served with an ice. By this time conversation was beginning to languish between them.

“ Why do people ever have these things ? ” she said, after a protracted silence, looking up from her plate and frowning slightly upon her brother. “ Should you imagine that any one could really enjoy them ? ”

“ Do you mean ices, or garden-parties ? ” he asked, smiling. “ However, it does not matter ; I have always supposed that you enjoyed both.”

“ Ices well enough,” she answered, with a shrug ; “ garden-parties not at all. There is absolutely nothing to do but to gossip. We might try that. I will begin. Before we left the house I saw Mr. Banks, with his one leg.”

“ He would probably bring all the legs he had,” was the half-laughing response. Walter was by no means satisfied with his sister’s mood. Wherein lay its defect he could not have said ; but her manner seemed touched by an unsympathetic chill, a cynical sprightliness, which was as puzzling as it was unnatural.

“ And I saw his daughter,” she pursued. “ People say all sorts of things of her.”

He closed his lips firmly over a rising reproof, and gazed steadily before him upon the vista of gentle lights and dim figures moving about over the illuminated obscurity of the paths and grass, and under the black trees and distant discouraged stars. The scene was like some old, long-forgotten picture, newly varnished and newly lighted, where under the unaccustomed brilliance the dust, the black, the gloom of all its long decades, hang jealously over it, defying the restorer's art.

Sophy was not to be silenced. "Have you heard anything about Miss Banks?" she inquired, with audacious frankness.

"No."

She laughed mischievously. "Neither have I," she said; "but I supposed that every one else had. What troubles you? Anything?"

"Do not let us suggest unpleasant things of people," he said, kindly, willing, as usual, to share the blame of her fault, if not its commission.

"Who suggested anything unpleasant? I said particularly 'all sorts of things.' Was not the remark a clever one with which to start a gossip? It is not original with me; I heard it once. Do not ask me to forget it. It would bring the latest news from any creature but a graven image — like you," she added, bowing to him.

Why was it, he asked himself, that since her recent insubordination even her most lightly expressed fancies had power to disturb him so? Any one else might speak as she had spoken, and he would have seen only the jest; but for her he had a constant jealous fear, a loving dread.

"Come," he said, rising, "we had better go in."

You must dance and enjoy yourself. I shall ask Miss Simcoe, if I can find her disengaged."

She made no motion toward following him. "Why need we?" she said. "There is plenty of time for the duties of the evening. You do not really want to go, do you? Wouldn't you rather stay?"

"How can you ask me?" he answered, with mock gallantry.

"It is simple enough to ask. How can you refuse? That is simple too, I see. Well, then, go alone. I like to muse in solitude. I shall watch the passing throng, and think how many people there are whom I don't know and don't want to, and who don't know me and I am glad of it."

He did not reply, nor did he leave her. "I shall not go alone," he said, with quiet displeasure.

She arose at once to her feet. "Come, then," she returned, laughing, and hurrying him along; "if I cannot enjoy my own society, I at least will not have any more of yours. You make me think of Bluebeard or Oliver Cromwell. 'There lie penalties in him!' Sometimes I vow that I will never, never do anything to offend you again; but vows amount to so little."

"If you don't carry them out," he laughed, with an air of relief. "Ah, well! never mind the vows; you are the dearest girl in the world! There's Jessie; now have a nice time, won't you?"

She clung to him yet a minute. "Look around," she said, "and see if old Mr. Clifton is anywhere in sight. If he is, I shall run away. He always catches me and talks about himself as a 'corner-sewer' and having a 'Q-zeen.' I do not speak his

language ; so if you see him near me, don't be alarmed if I appear to be in distress."

Finally cast loose from her anchor, Sophy was obliged to exert herself and be entertained. As she concluded one dance, Mrs. Frost spoke to her. "Are you not coming soon to call upon me?" she asked, cordially. "My friend Miss Griswold has arrived since I saw you, and will remain until the autumn ; I should like to have you know her."

As Sophy was replying appropriately, Lanman approached with a pink-robed young lady upon his arm, — a dark, long-throated damsel she was, with an erect bearing and a well-chilled vivacity.

"Here is Miss Griswold now," Mrs. Frost continued ; "I had hardly hoped to-night for an opportunity to make you known to each other." And indeed the introduction was no sooner accomplished than Miss Griswold was borne away by a partner of previous engagement, leaving Lanman at Sophy's side.

"Will you dance with me?" he asked, as Mrs. Frost's attention was claimed elsewhere. "You are not immediately engaged, are you?"

"I am not engaged at all," she answered, laughing at the odd sound of the reply.

"Ah, then you do not care about it ! Shall we go out of doors ? It is a beautiful night."

Sophy's amusement that the will of Fate should grant her her own way, sent her glance about the rooms in search of Walter, who would have deprived her of it. Her present escort at least was all compliance ; he would not force her to return to the heat and confusion of the rooms against her will, though she should choose to linger until daybreak.

They left the house and sauntered forth on to the veranda and the lawn. The air was sweet with the odor of mignonette and petunia. The grass was soft and dewless. A young moon was sailing serenely in a cloudless sky. It was a perfect night.

"You have a true love for beautiful nature, have you not?" he said, rather tamely, enjoying her enjoyment.

"It fascinates me," she answered, withdrawing her attention from its dusky radiance with a sigh.

"When are you coming to sketch at Frostmore again?"

"I am afraid never. My fancy for sketching at Frostmore seems to have flown."

"You surely do not mean that! Are you never going to forgive that miserable gardener's blunder?"

"Never! On his account I quarrelled with my brother and lost a whole week's work. He does not deserve to live."

"Consider him slain! But seriously, might you not replace the lost work?"

"It would be of no use for me to try. I can never repeat anything. Walter was glad that the plaque was broken. I had intended to sell it, and he does not like to have me earn money."

Her companion regarded her with interest. "I do not wonder at that," he said, quietly. "Money amounts to nothing."

"Oh, excuse me! I assure you life may be growled at much more enjoyably from behind a comfortable income. Not that I should ever be able to earn very much, perhaps, but at least the effort would be interesting."

"I should think that you might make a success in art," he said, speaking perforce. "I saw the ruin of your work, and have been wishing to congratulate you upon the possession of such ability. Your treatment of that little bit of landscape was very clever. It was only a little bit that I saw, as you may imagine, but it seemed to tell the story."

"Oh, that was nothing! You should see the river as it really is on such a night as this. It is far lovelier than at any other time, even at sunset." Suddenly she stopped. "Should you like to see it to-night, now?" she asked.

"I should indeed," he answered, readily.

"Come with me, then;" and leaving the vicinity of the other straying figures, they turned their steps in the direction of the gate. "Perhaps you have seen the river by moonlight," she said, when they were well out upon the road; "I did not think to ask you that. Perhaps you do not care to come."

"I care very much. And your sister — she will not think us too unceremonious?"

"She will be extremely displeased," was the uncompromising answer, — "but not with you, only with me; so we need not think of it. Tell me why it is that you are not oftener on the river, when Frostmore is so near?"

"We have had little time," he answered; "there has been so much to do and to see. The country is so beautiful about here, and the people are so cordial and friendly."

"What has pleased you most?" she asked, with interest.

"I dare not say," he returned, feeling dangerously complimentary.

She laughed in unembarrassed mirth. "How delightfully non-committal!" she said. "You must have hosts of friends."

"Their name is legion. Yet I have a place for one more. And you?"

"I have very few, and could get along well with even fewer; there is so little time in life for the things which are worth doing. I want to study, not art alone, but to study generally, so that I may be more appreciative in art. Confess," she added, breaking the earnestness of her last remark with a light laugh, — "confess that you have given me credit for caring to know nothing."

He had followed her seriousness with an answering seriousness. Now his manner again took its tone from hers.

"I!" he exclaimed, gayly, "I assure you that you are wrong. The first time I saw you I said to myself: 'There is a young lady of research!'"

Thank you! You cannot imagine what I said to myself about you."

"Indeed I cannot. What was it?"

"You are expecting a compliment; so I think that I will not tell you."

Rather to her disappointment, he did not press the question. "Tell me, then," he asked instead, "what you thought of Mr. Frost? You saw him, did you not?"

She blushed a little at the recollection of the scene as it arose before her. "How could I think anything in so short a time?" she said.

"I deduce from that a compliment, in spite of you," he returned, laughing. "You thought nothing of him because you saw him only for an instant; but

upon seeing me for even so short a time —” He broke off expressively.

“Now I will tell you what it was, and you shall decide whether it was even as complimentary as not thinking at all. I thought you perfectly heartless, and wished you twenty thousand leagues under the sea!”

“Why did you think me heartless?”

“Because you would persist in looking at me, instead of pretending not to know that I was there. That proved it.”

“That should have proved quite the contrary, should it not?”

As he spoke, they stepped in sight of the silent water, — a molten placidity, with the glorious path of the rising moon burnishing its surface.

“Could a river be more beautiful?” she exclaimed, in a subdued voice. “I love it better than anything in the world. Some day, when I am old and disappointed, and am sure that I can never be successful, I am coming here to this very spot to drown myself. The water is seventeen feet deep under those bushes.”

“Be careful,” he urged, reaching forth a saving hand.

“Of what?” she asked, recklessly. “I shall not fall; and if I should, you know I have only to ‘remember one or two simple things,’ and I cannot sink.” Then she turned toward him, still clinging to the slender maple, and keeping but one foot upon the bank.

“Do not you like Mrs. Frost very much?” she asked. “Tell me honestly.”

She had a way of dashing unconventionally straight

to the point, which entertained him, but he was too entirely accustomed to polite prevarication to be able to allow himself to follow her.

"Mrs. Frost is a charming lady," he said, loyally.

"Ah! then you will not tell me?"

"Do you want me to say that she is not charming?"

"When one calls a woman charming," she said, oracularly, "it really means nothing; it is an evasion. But never mind that; tell me something about her, — tell me everything."

"Must we talk about Mrs. Frost?" he said, pleadingly. "Look at the river."

She only shook her head.

"I will tell you, then, what I know," he began, obediently; "but it will not interest you, I am afraid. I never met her until she was engaged to Mr. Frost. He and I were in college together: you knew that? Immediately after he graduated he went abroad, and later when I followed I met him at Bonn. He was engaged then to Miss Rogers, — now Mrs. Frost, — and was following her party about Europe. So I left them."

"Did he say nothing to you of her?"

"Only that he was to marry her."

"And she, how did she appear? Oh, you do not tell me anything!"

"How can you say that, when I am killing myself with trying to remember? I told you that it was not interesting."

"But it is. Please to go on."

"I will," he continued, laughing, "and I did then, — I went on. Six months later, I came home to be best man at their wedding. After which they went

abroad again. When they came back they settled in the city, where they have lived ever since, with interruptions. Now they are to try living here for a change. That brings the story up to the present day."

There was a silence.

"You would make an excellent witness," she said at length, stepping back beside him, — "you can say so much, and tell so little."

"Will you answer one question in return for that which I have tried to tell you? Surely I have told you as much as one thing."

"Yes, one, perhaps; I will answer one."

"Why are you so interested in Mrs. Frost?"

"Because her life seems to me so perfect now, that I have wondered if it had always been so. I do not envy her lot for myself, but I should think that others would."

"Why should they envy her, and you not? It seems to me that her life has been as comfortable as a life could be."

"I do not want a comfortable life," she said; "I intend to be an artist. When the opportunity occurs, I shall begin to study in earnest. That is always hard work; and with such an object, I should enjoy work more than all the ease in the world."

"What is to be your first step?"

"I must find exactly the right teacher."

"If I can assist you in that, have I your permission to do so? I think I know the very man you want, — a man with a deserved reputation, who is a tremendous worker."

"How good you are!" she said, with impersonal frankness. "Who is he? Have I heard of him? Will you give me his address?"

"I can do better than that, for he is staying at Frostmore. His name is Erskine. You have heard it?"

"Yes, indeed. Is he here to-night? I mean is he there, — at the house?"

"No, he is not socially inclined; but he shall meet you if you are willing. Do not think too confidently of the arrangement yet. You may dislike him."

"That would make no difference if he will teach me. I should be bound to like that in him." Then Lanman could see that she was very much in earnest.

They had left the river alone with the moonlight, and were returning along the road, deserted but for them.

"Mr. Lanman," she said, when they had arrived within sight of the tall gate-posts, "do you know what my people will do to me for this?"

"What do you mean?" he asked, trying to appear ignorant of any enormity.

"For disappearing. I shall be dreadfully taken to task for having persuaded you."

"But if I persuaded you?" he suggested, mendaciously.

They had not passed half the distance toward the house when they encountered Jessie, upon the arm of a gentleman in dazzling epaulettes and buttons to correspond.

"Why, Sophy, where have you been?" she exclaimed, in subdued excitement. "I have been looking for you everywhere. Fortunately Mr. Hunter saw you go out, or I should never have found you."

"Yes, you would," she answered, presenting her own companion, with rather a wintry smile upon the

observing officer. "I was coming to you. We have been to see the river. I did not tell you, because I knew that you would think it too damp; but it was not damp, was it, Mr. Lanman?"

"Not at all," he answered, stoutly; "no damper than it is here, — not as damp."

Later, as he approached her in the dance, he spoke to her.

"That was not an overwhelming retribution," he said, smiling; "I congratulate you."

"Do not," she returned, lightly; "it has not yet begun."

CHAPTER V.

THE town was as gay as never before. The Frostmore mansion blossomed nightly with lights from turret to foundation, and the little inn was filled to overflowing.

Those who were able to entertain were suddenly smitten with a desire to do so in their very best style; while those who were unable went where they were asked, and augmented the number of the social chorus which formed the background for the action of the more prominent participators.

There had been some consultation among the Verrick family as to whether they too should not bid the world to a feast. Jessie was in favor of the idea, and Rob was positive as to the ease with which success might be attained.

"It is nothing," he assured them, as one who draws largely from a full experience. "I could do it myself. You must tear about all the time, talking to the ones who have nothing to say, and fill them all up to the muzzle with salad and coffee, and let them go."

"Oh, Rob," reproved Jessie, gently, "what an expression!"

"Never mind the expression," he answered, stoutly; "that is the way to do it."

But despite this valuable advice, prudent opposition continued; and when Aunt Sophronia was

written to upon the subject, and it was found that she could not make it convenient to matronize and patronize the affair, its undertaking was forthwith abandoned.

As is usually the case in a small town where there is but one thoroughfare of any importance, the new Frostmore residents were remarked and known by the other inhabitants before they had been three days settled. The Frostmore victoria never failed to create a sensation, with its luxurious ladies, its dapper young coachman with booted legs stretched before his admiring gaze, — wonders of white and yellow and tightness of fit, — its shining, showy horses and dazzling chained harness.

Miss Griswold, Mrs. Frost's visitor, was a young lady who claimed a full share of the general attention wherever she went. She was one of fashion's pet followers, constructed without that troublesome personality which sometimes forbids one to adopt a prevailing style. Were short-waisted gowns and large hats in vogue, straightway her belt travelled up under her arms, and her head-gear assumed the proportions of a modified umbrella. But so well were all adapted to the wearer that it seemed that fashion had decreed by chance the very mode best fitted to become her; and so a casual observer might continue to believe until he should see her clad in a later style entirely opposed to the former in every point, but still displaying the same perfection of personal suitability.

To progress satisfactorily through the social world, a young lady endowed with artistic appreciation of form and color, and the ability to direct their proper application, is far more thoroughly

equipped for a triumphant career than if she were possessed of the wisdom of Solomon himself.

Miss Griswold had slain her thousands already, and laid present siege to the hearts of Frostmore observers, driving, or mounted on her bony thoroughbred, or tramping along the roads in short skirts and heavy boots, carrying a raw-hide in one hand, and holding with the other the collar of her enormous mastiff, the General, who stalked solemnly at her side, as entirely and indifferently conscious of his superiority as was his dashing young mistress.

In due time the Verrick sisters called upon the ladies at Frostmore. Neither had entered the house since they were children, when they had sometimes accompanied their nurse to see her aunt, the housekeeper. Although much of the fitting and all the finishing touches were new to them, they remembered well the great hall with the double staircase at the back upon which it had in former days been their delight to play, and the big rooms, then so silent, with their mysterious shrouded contents, wherein trespassing had been forbidden. Sophy feared an embarrassing encounter with her small friend at the lake: what awkward suggestions might he not put forth! Or would he forget their original interview? That was too cheering to be probable. It was to her relief, therefore, that he did not appear during her call, nor did the older masculine members of the household present themselves.

After this, a few days passed peacefully, not to say monotonously, along. Rob had gone for a short visit at the home of a schoolmate, and Walter was also away much of the time. Sophy thought with in-

terest of her promised meeting with the artist Erskine, but she heard nothing of it. Perhaps he had refused to know her! This was rather a galling thought. Perhaps Mr. Lanman had forgotten! But that was too discouraging to be possible.

At length one evening Walter reported having spent the day with Lanman as a companion. They had fished together, and renewed and improved upon a former slight acquaintance, finding during the day's sport so much which was congenial in each other's society that Lanman, upon learning the fact of there being yet a week remaining of Walter's vacation, had extended to him on the spot an invitation to spend the last days of his time in discovering for himself the attractions of a sportsman's paradise to which he, Lanman, held the key.

The place belonged to a Mr. Wynne, Lanman's former guardian, — an uneasy gentleman, without domestic ties or inclinations, who was seldom resident there, but who opened his house once or twice a year, when he entertained liberally and paid his social debts; which being done, he once more departed, leaving the place to his ward and his ward's nephew if they chose to occupy it, or if they should be absent, to servants and solitude.

Lanman's one care, he told Walter, was an orphan nephew, the child of his elder half-brother, a boy of seventeen, whose only home had been Mr. Wynne's mansion since his childhood. This had taken Lanman thither much more frequently than he might otherwise have been inclined to go, inspiring in him a warm home attachment for the place which he had learned to know so well. But now that the boy was fitted for college, and there would no longer be a

necessity for his visits, he fell, with unconscious predisposition, into the adoption of a theory which had been propounded in his hearing, to the end that the growing youngsters of the day were enduring an over-amount of brain-work ; after which he decided, with a satisfactory reconciliation of duty and inclination, that his especial youngster must take a year of rest from study before he should again enter upon educational labor.

All his life it had been Lanman's fortune to see only the company side of his friends. True, he had many intimates of his own sex and age, for in college he had been extremely popular ; but the feminine home element had been quite left out of his life. He was one who never could be induced to make long visits, dividing his time between travelling, sojourning with Mr. Wynne, and solitude in his own apartments.

Once, some years back, upon the coming of age of one of his friends, he had been among those bidden to celebrate the event, and had found himself quite ready to execrate the fate which had ordained that he should live so alone. Who cared whether he were twenty-one or ninety ? Who would embroider his crest upon his handkerchiefs, or construct elaborate purses and lap-rugs for his comfort ? The fact that he could buy and pay for as many of such things as he could possibly use, had entirely failed to comfort him. So he had restlessly cut short his stay, resisting all entreaties to remain on the part of his friend or the mother and sisters he so much coveted, and he had betaken himself to the Wynne mansion, where an ever-changing army of young ladies and their chaperones were in full possession.

Since then ten years had passed away. Lanman had experienced nearly thirty-five years of life,—half of those threescore and ten which are in undisturbed nature the allowance of man. He looked upon his condition as settled, his destiny as fixed. As his nephew's guardian and benefactor he must play his part, and live for his ward's interest and future when the boy should have attained an age which might be considered to possess interests and a future. In the mean time he need only please himself.

And engaged in this agreeable business, we find him without a care or an ungratified wish to mar the luxury of the flying days. A trifle worldly he was, perhaps, — careless of the deeper thoughts and ambitions which weave themselves through the lives of men whose abilities have been sharpened by necessity for action, yet possessed of a good-hearted generosity, which saved him from extreme selfishness, and a gentlemanly nature which gave him a preference for refining pursuits.

One evening, as the Verricks were strolling about their domain according to custom, they found the entire Frostmore party, not excepting the mastiff, within their gates; and here also, in close attendance upon Miss Griswold, appeared the stranger artist, Mr. Erskine. He was a short, thickset man, of abrupt manner, with an expressionless countenance and a mirthless laugh which he seemed to endure rather than to enjoy. He needed no entertaining, his soul being evidently satisfied to the full in the contemplation of Miss Griswold's picturesqueness.

"We have descended upon you like an avalanche," apologized that young lady, affably. "Do not think

that we are returning your call in so uncereceremonious a fashion. We were giving the General a little exercise, and Mr. Lanman saw you through the gate; so at his proposal we ventured to stop for a minute."

The General appeared to find a "little exercise" entirely sufficient, and sank willingly upon his stomach, to yawn and pant at his leisure. If ever a living creature exactly represented and expressed a well-worn word, the General might be said to typify the term "blasé."

"We are thinking of having a little excursion to-morrow," said Mrs. Frost to Jessie, — "an out-of-doors luncheon at the cascade. I wish I could persuade you and your sister and brother to join us; it would be kindness in you. We have one extra gentleman, who must drive alone if you do not take pity on him."

Sophy for a moment hardly heeded the invitation. Standing by Erskine, she was hoping that he would speak to her of the subject nearest her heart; but Erskine hardly spoke to any one, and not at all to her. If he wished to ignore her, she thought, he need not be so pronounced in his ignoring. He plainly took no interest in her.

Indeed, he did not appear to be socially inclined. Mr. Lanman had described his peculiarity very moderately in so speaking of him. Miss Griswold must know that his admiring eyes were upon her. How well she looked standing there in her dull red gown, with her head slightly turned from him as she talked with Walter! She held in her hand the flexible whip intended for the General's correction; that too was part of the picture.

"Mr. Wynne has a charming place," she said, bending her whip about with a meditative air; "I have often visited there. In fact," she added, laughing, "I do not know where I have not visited. My sister, Mrs. Garland, has a great many friends who are continually asking us. She dislikes visiting; I adore it. Fortunately, when I am with Mrs. Frost no other chaperone is necessary."

"Your home is in the city, is it not?" Walter asked.

"It has not been, although we are to be there this winter. I think that we shall like the change, although we are both restless. Last summer we travelled all the time, and during the winter we remained out of town, on account of my sister's health. The winter before that, I went abroad with Mrs. Frost, so you see the city will be very new to me. I hope we shall discover that we know more people than I think. It will be perfectly unbearable if there should not be a great deal going on."

Sophy wondered what reply Walter would make to this last remark. That sentiment of unrest had been her own for many a day, to his avowed disapproval; yet surely her uneasy aspirations were for something of more value than social dissipation.

She anticipated his words with as much interest as if she were not well aware of the necessarily concurring civility which they must express. When they had been spoken, she turned away with a little sigh.

"You are to trust yourself to my driving to-morrow," Lanman said, approaching her just at that moment. "It has been settled. You are not alarmed at the idea, I hope?"

"Oh, no!" she answered, indifferently, wondering whether she might question him as to the conduct of his artist friend. "Is there any reason why I should be afraid especially, — are the horses unbroken, or are you unskilful?"

Should she ask him? No, she dared not. If Mr. Erskine had flatly declined her acquaintance, it might be embarrassing for her present companion to confess it. He had meant to do her a service. He was entitled, then, in common gratitude to a little more attention than she was at present bestowing upon him.

"You are to leave Frostmore soon, are you not?" she began, arousing her interest. "Walter has told me of the proposed plan. He has had an anxious eye upon you ever since you appeared this evening. I am sure he would like to talk with you."

And a little later, when the visitors were preparing to take their departure, Walter did seize the opportunity of a word with his future host, in consequence of which that gentleman excused himself from returning immediately to Frostmore.

Sophy stood without the gate, and with sorrowful glances watched Erskine's receding figure as it moved along, accompanied by Miss Griswold's æsthetic draperies and the lumbering majesty of the General. Ah, well, there were other teachers in the world! But here was such an opportunity lost. She was more disappointed than she had thought. To be thus dashed in her very first near hope. It was cruel!

She returned to the house, to find her brother and his guest alone upon the veranda, Jessie having excused herself, to consult with Augustine regarding the alteration of the domestic arrangements for

the morrow. Sophy would also have passed within doors, but Walter reached forth a hand and detained her.

"Don't leave us," he said.

"I was going to the sitting-room," she answered, hesitating.

And her hesitation ended, to Lanman's delight, in his receiving an invitation to continue his visit informally in this their family retreat. As the friendly door closed upon them, Sophy electrified her two companions by hiding her face upon her brother's shoulder and bursting into tears.

"I cannot help it," she sobbed, "I am so tired; and I thought they never would go."

"After that you must speak to Mr. Lanman," urged Walter, trying to comfort her, "and tell him that you do not include him in your remark."

Lanman, who was by no means so sure of that, was relieved, and pleased when she blindly reached forth a hand in his direction, although she would not raise her face or speak. He experienced an agreeable sensation of semi-proprietorship with the clasp of that strong young hand, which he reluctantly surrendered, in the wish to be of use. He beat the soft cushions for her with as much vigor and celerity as if he had had life-long experience in such domestic occupations; and this accomplished to his mind, dashed off into hitherto unexplored regions in search of water, — that inevitable offering of a man at his wits' end! He opened more doors than it seemed reasonable that any house should contain, and turned baffled from closets, entries, cellar-ways, and coal-bins, before he came upon the kitchen, which he found entirely deserted.

When he returned to the patient she was seated, in a state of restored calmness, upon the lounge beside her brother. Beyond a more fluffy appearance of the hair and a flushed face, she gave no sign of recent distress. Lanman was disappointed; he would have liked occasion for a little coaxing on his own part. He felt that he almost deserved it.

"If you knew what I have been through to get this," he said, proffering the beverage, and ignoring the fact that he had selected for its reception an elderly china mug, "you would not decline it even if you were disposed to do so. I have been irretrievably lost a dozen times."

At which remark the cure was complete indeed, and she laughed outright. "Who could have given you this magnificent article?" she said, taking a gingerly sip.

"No one gave it to me; I did not see a human being. I took it because it seemed to be the only small thing there was."

She laughed again. "It was very kind of you," she said, "and water was exactly what I wanted. I was afraid that you had gone to find Jessie, and I am so glad that you had not! I would even rather drink from the soap-mug."

"*Soap!* Was there soap in the thing?" he exclaimed, startled.

"No, indeed; not a bit now, — only Augustine uses it to take the soap from the barrel. It is perfectly washed; but we do not generally drink from it."

Lanman was humbled. "Let me try again," he said, eagerly; "I will be more careful this time, and perhaps I may light upon the dining-room by some happy chance."

"Oh, thank you, no!" she answered, rising; "the dining-room is the last place that you would ever be able to find, without a map of colored routes. I will go myself, and return this bric-à-brac before it is missed. You might not think it, but it is an extremely necessary and precious possession."

It was late when Lanman took his departure, and when he did leave, it was with regret. Here was a home which was all home. No wonder that brothers and sisters who lived so together should be unaffected and friendly to outsiders. They were probably compassionate also. They ought to be if they sufficiently valued their surroundings.

Occupied with these thoughts, he strolled slowly along the road under the stars, his newly lighted cigar flashing occasionally like a little beacon in the gloom. As he mounted the steps of the Frostmore mansion he beheld another light flashing redly at the farther end of the veranda, while the friendly voice of his host accosted him.

"Yours was a long call for a short one, Lan," it said, with a laugh. "Come over here and finish your cigar. What have you been doing with yourself all this time? I was thinking of having the river dragged."

"You were making yourself very comfortable, meanwhile," returned Lanman, laughing, and seating himself on the broad balustrade. "I shall know how to behave when you are lost, — I shall sit in a steamer-chair and gaze at the stars. But seriously, I could not leave any sooner, — at least I did not."

"Ah, as of old, 'the woman tempted me!'"

"Yes; and, 'as of old,' the victim was a willing one. They are pleasant people, Frost; I like them."

“Evidently.”

“I should think that they would be quite an addition to your circle here. They have education, and originality to lend a spice.”

“You have one particularly in your mind, I see.”

Lanman laughed. “I suppose I have,” he admitted; “she interests me. She has quite an unusual mind. With the right kind of government, she would make a remarkable woman.”

“You are enthusiastic,” remarked his companion, laconically.

The other struck the end of his cigar away into the bushes with his cane, and watched the little meteor until its light was lost. “It is exactly this,” he said, at length: “the girl interests me because she seems refreshingly natural, and has a good quality of mind, with the ability to grasp a subject thoroughly and quickly. With that ability, why should she not succeed well in her chosen study of art? And why should I not help her in it if I can? What are you laughing at?”

“At you and your disinterestedness.”

“Pshaw! I did not think that you were so commonplace. This is not a usual case. If you knew the young lady you would be sure of it. She is interested heart and soul in her artistic future. I have hardly spoken two words to her which were not connected with that subject.”

“Pshaw!” returned his friend, still laughing; “I did not think that you were so commonplace.”

Lanman was obliged to laugh also. “Frost, will you be sensible,” he expostulated, “and let me explain that remark, which evidently rankles? I only intended to say that I thought you had been long

enough in the world, and seen people enough, not to fall into the common error of supposing that every man and woman who find each other's society agreeable, are objects of conjecture."

"But if my experience leads me to thus 'suppose'?"

"If it does, I lament. That is an ordinary view; there are always exceptions."

"I think," said Frost, "that the world is ordinary, and I suppose that I am of the earth earthy."

"At least you are hopeless," returned Lanman; "and there is nothing to do but to leave you to time. Although I am by no means positive on the point, it may be that if you live longer you will know more."

CHAPTER VI.

NO matter how discouraged one has been overnight, there is much which is reassuring in the very morning light itself. And such a morning! The breeze, the flowers, the birds, the glorious golden sunlight, all assisted Sophy in believing that there was still hope in the future. She was so completely absorbed in her one idea that all nature had a part in it.

Sophy found herself expected to occupy the box-seat on the drive over, Jessie having declined that desirable and top-lofty position.

Ah, what happiness! And with that happiness how hope still grew! Sophy's delight exceeded the measure of a more even nature. Now her lot seemed to her without a parallel. How she pitied the groom, who must step aside from the horses' heads and turn back along the dusty road in solitude.

Lanman made his horses fly. He knew that the girl at his side was the very one to enjoy the exhilaration of high speed, and it pleased him to see her face in its bright happiness. The others talked together. Walter had much to say about the surrounding country and its advantages for fishing and camping out, Jessie could express a civil interest, and Lanman could question and reply; but Sophy had no thought for anything but the strong, stiff

breeze in her face, the flying road and bushes, and the placid, steadfast sky. The following carriage was soon left far in the rear; and not until the occupants of the leading one had reached their destination and had been some time received and disposed of by the advance guard, did it appear, making its way moderately toward them.

The cascade was in the midst of a mossy, shady retreat, where the river, there in its extreme youth, gambolled and frisked as is the juvenile prerogative.

A depression of comfortably roomy proportion near to the water's edge was selected as a drawing-room. Beyond, through a farther opening in the trees, the servants could be seen moving busily about, engaged in preparations for the forthcoming meal.

Sophy found herself at once taken in charge by her former friend, the heir-apparent of the house of Frost. With the self-possession which had before distinguished him, he presented his younger brother, and entered upon a conversation which, as she had feared, referred to her with significant ambiguity as a friend.

"This is my brother Lolly," he said, pulling the reluctant Lawrence by the sleeve. "Lolly, this is the lady."

"You must not let the boys annoy you," Mrs. Frost remarked to her. "You seem to have entirely won Roger's heart. Ever since the day you called, he has been quite unhappy that he was not at home to receive you."

Sophy wondered how much the enamoured Roger had told his serene mamma of herself. Could he have told her *all*? At length, with a boy upon either side, she gladly allowed herself to be led for a

short distance up the little hill, to assist in the amusement of sailing small ships of twigs and leaves down to their destruction in the gentle rapids below. From her position she could see the rest of the party disposed almost all together upon the rugs and cushions. Miss Griswold had for her especial entertaining Mr. Frost and Mr. Erskine; but the others were listening to her also, and her remarks were meeting with distinguished success. Finally, the devoted Erskine produced a banjo, which he gave into the hands of his siren, who forthwith sang and played in a truly siren-like manner. Sophy and her small companions suspended their occupation to listen. Little save the general effect of the song could be heard from where they sat, but the selections were evidently of a popular and rollicking order.

At the end of the third song Roger sighed, and changed his position. "There!" he said, with an air of some relief, "she will not sing any more."

"Why not?" asked Sophy, still looking down at the musician, who was sitting, with her hands clasped across the banjo's head, gazing laughingly into Mr. Erskine's eyes.

"After she has once stopped," explained Roger, confidentially, "she never begins again. I do not know why that is. Some day I shall ask her to tell me. The General does not like singing. He always goes out when anybody sings. You know the General?"

Sophy admitted that she and the General had met.

"He was mine," said Roger, — "mine and Lolly's. But we were going away when he was a little bit of a dog, and so Miss Griswold took him; and now he

does not care for us, because we did not bring him up."

"But papa says—" began Lolly, finding his tongue, now that no one was attending to him too pointedly. His brother, however, cut him short.

"You must not tell what papa says. Gentlemen never tell of anything that they hear or see."

"When did you learn that?" Sophy inquired, not without some hope that the lesson might have been inculcated long enough to include the episode which she would have forgotten.

"My papa said it; he said it to Lolly only yesterday." Here Roger frowned severely at his brother, who relapsed into reluctant silence; which satisfactory state of things being established, he himself resumed the conversation and carried it valiantly on.

"I shall come over to see you very soon," he said, kindly, — "to paint, you know; some day when Minna is busy. I don't care about having Minna come, so I will wait until a day when mamma wants her. We should not be having a good time like this to-day if she were here. She has a bad cold, so she could not come."

"And Lolly," said Sophy, smiling, — "Lolly would like to paint too, would not he?"

"Lolly is so little," Roger began, disparagingly; but this was more than Lolly could bear.

"Why, Woger!" he interrupted, reproachfully, "I'm 'most as big as you are; I'm only a little littler."

And here, Lanman approaching the group, the boys drew back together to the stream, to discuss the question of Lolly's eligibility in their own way.

"Is not Roger a young tyrant?" Lanman said, laughing, as he seated himself. "Did you ever see such a topping youth in your life? He is not one of those who would sell his birthright, I should say. He has been reducing Lolly to his proper level, has he not? He usually does, as often as once in a half hour."

"He is very entertaining," she answered, "and very observing; I am quite afraid of him."

"We all are that, I assure you. There is not one of us who is not ambitious to put his best foot forward before him. Miss Griswold says that he was quite as self-possessed and observing when he was two years old as he is now."

"How well do you know Miss Griswold?" she asked, changing the subject abruptly.

"I have known her for several years, although I have not been in the habit of seeing her often. I meet her occasionally at Mr. Wynne's."

"You admire her, do you not?"

"Yes, indeed. I am an adorer of ancient date. She has forgotten the fact by this time, I daresay. There is Erskine;" and he smiled with a little significant shrug toward that gentleman and his very apparent devotion. "By the way," he added, "you have not seen any of his work yet."

"I have hardly more than seen him," she answered, thinking of last evening.

"He is very clever. He has been making some sketches lately at Mr. Wynne's."

"Mr. Wynne's again!" she exclaimed. "Does all the world meet at Mr. Wynne's?"

"Certainly; all the world. I have an idea that I shall live to see you there."

She laughed. "I can think of nothing more unlikely," she said.

"Ah, you may laugh!" he returned, laughing also; "but I would be willing to stake something on it."

"What would you stake?" she asked, curiously. "What do people stake besides money?"

"Gloves and cigars, — little things of that kind. Did you never bet?"

"Never; but I will make a beginning. What must I do? I should like to have you bet something very nice, as I shall be sure to win."

With elaborate gravity he produced a small address-book.

"It must be recorded," he said, "and you must sign the agreement. In the first place, the amount of the wager: I will bet you a dozen — two, three dozen — pairs of gloves, against the privilege of calling you by your first name."

This was getting on rather fast, and so he told himself in the short silence which followed.

"Of course I should win," she said, contemptuously; "but if I lost!"

"If you lost," he repeated, with insinuating gentleness, "would that be so very dreadful?"

"But I have such a hideous name. How can you wish to remind me of it? And then my sister! She would expire outright if she heard you, and I should have to tell her that it was on account of a bet, — which would not improve matters."

"You are forgetting, are you not, how very unlikely it is that I shall win? We may be old friends when it happens, if it ever does happen, and Miss Verrick as well satisfied as any one with the arrangement."

"As you please, then," she answered; "but I warn you it is not worth so many gloves."

"I am warned," he answered, writing rapidly in his book. "There! You must sign that, and the thing is done."

At luncheon the ever-vigilant Lanman took pains to present Mr. Erskine in form to Miss Sophy Verrick, before whisking himself away to the side of his hostess.

It would be safe to conclude that two more unwilling candidates for introduction were never brought together. Sophy's indifference to the progress of their acquaintance was fully equalled by that of Mr. Erskine. Conversation flagged and expired between them, and the artist transferred his sensibility to his eyes, directing many detected glances toward Miss Griswold and her distant enchantment, which his own companion was able, with ready indifference, to forgive.

"I am sure I wish him there with all my heart," she thought; "he cannot desire it more than I do;" and she smiled grimly to herself at the vision which the enslaver just then presented. Miss Griswold was seated between Mr. Frost and Walter Verrick. She was discoursing upon some subject with the greatest animation, interspersed with little laughing glances into the faces upon either side of her, and the others were laughing with her. Whether or no she had a heart to be broken by any undue show of attention on the part of her admirer for another, Erskine neglected to make use of the time-honored expedient. It was well, Sophy thought; for Miss Griswold's eyes and attention were so entirely employed that she would never have noticed the dem-

onstration. At present she was illustrating something with the aid of her fingers. What beautifully cared-for nails she displayed, like rose-pink, highly polished jewels! She wore no rings except upon the little fingers, where they twinkled in apparently limitless number. The hands were not of an especially pretty shape; but that fact it was hard to realize, so completely was the attention taken by their extreme correctness and style.

Erskine's remarks became fewer and more desultory; and when Sophy found it possible to leave him, he seemed far from reluctant that she should depart. Consequently she was surprised, and by no means delighted, when shortly after, as she was strolling along toward the road, she found him again at her side.

"You did not ask me to go with you," he said, not removing his hands from the pockets of his short coat; "but perhaps you will not object if I do so."

They walked on together almost in silence to the spot where the carriages were standing, with lowered, empty shafts, and near by the sleek horses, fastened with a cruel kindness which rendered futile their desire to nibble indiscriminately at the surrounding foliage. Here, with the aid of the servant in charge, she took her portfolio from one of the carriages. Then she paused.

"I was going farther to sketch," she said, pointedly, to her companion, wishing to be rid of him.

"I thought so," he returned, quietly; "I will go with you."

Sophy almost laughed as they walked on, although the prospect of sketching in the presence of so seemingly prejudiced a critic was anything but alluring.

He made no suggestion as to the selection of a favorable position ; but when she manifested a disposition to pause, he seated himself near her with few words, after which he produced his own materials from the depths of mysterious pockets, and began his work.

So they sat in silence, and glared at the innocent, sunny landscape, — he with quick, self-reliant comprehension, able, unmoved by all its beauty ; she with eyelids half drawn together, her whole heart in the struggle for the simple translation of such great and varied loveliness. Ten, twenty, thirty minutes flew by, and their successors, ten, twenty, thirty minutes, followed them.

“ You draw well,” he said, with an abruptness which startled her : “ you draw intelligently.”

It was no compliment which he was offering her, — merely the statement of a fact ; and as such she received it, although embarrassed by his notice. She leaned forward and looked at the result of his half-finished labors ; then, without an instant’s hesitation, held her study beside his. The despairing smile with which she regarded the comparison intensified as she looked, until, in extreme disgust, she cut the paper from its block, and tore the despised sketch three times across.

Her companion watched her unmoved. “ You have no reason to be discouraged,” he said, slowly ; “ you were doing as well as you could with so difficult a subject.”

“ I have heard something of the boldness of inexperience,” she returned. “ It was that, I suppose, which led me to undertake it ; ” and she looked again at the natural picture, and then at its incomplete

ghost, washed in so correctly and firmly by the stubby, skilful fingers, which she had noticed only to despise. "Have you ever received pupils?" she asked him, timidly.

"Never," he answered, shortly. "Why?"

"Because I thought — I should like — Oh! I do not know why I asked. I must go back now to the others; they may be thinking of going home." So saying, she arose in some confusion, and collected her implements. "Do not let me interrupt you," she added; "I will go alone."

Without any sign of animation or of interest, he stopped her. "Wait," he said, bluntly; "I have something to say to you."

She turned at his words, and stood looking silently down upon him as he carefully arranged his belongings, and replaced each in its especial pocket. Then he arose and stood before her. "Do you wish for instruction in the study of art?" he asked, examining narrowly the nails upon one of his hands as he spoke.

She regarded him curiously. "I did wish it," she answered.

He gave no outward sign of possessing the soul of an artist. He had a round, heavy looking head, and a chest broad enough for a man with six inches additional length of limb. Where beneath that imperturbable covering was lodged the fine, poetical perception of loveliness and the power, which she knew him to possess, of the delicate nicety of its expression?

"I will teach you," he said, in a tone which seemed to imply, "whether you like it or not." "I shall not be able to begin with you for a month, and you

will be obliged to live in the city while you study with me. That is all."

"You are very kind, Mr. Erskine," she began, coldly; but he stopped her with a gesture.

"It is no kindness," he said. "You will not be under obligation to me; it will be for my advantage to teach you. I told the friend who suggested it that I should have nothing whatever to do with your instruction unless I found your capacity sufficient. It appears to me to be sufficient. At any rate, I am willing to take the risk. It will only remain for you to be attentive and work."

There was something very bewildering in this far-from-expected situation; at the same time it was satisfying. Her past vague ambition took possession of her with a strength heretofore unknown. For had not he, indifferent as he was, been able to see the reward of his services in the magnitude of her future reputation?

They found the other members of the party grouped together discussing the home drive. All agreed that it would be pleasant to return by a circuitous route, and so to spend the afternoon in driving. "Anything is better than staying here," cried Miss Griswold, gayly. "It is dreadful to be long in one place; I can bear anything better than that."

The sketchers were welcomed with enthusiasm, and the result of their labors demanded as a right. Erskine handed his work about as one accustomed to and fearless of criticism. Sophy was obliged to explain her empty handed condition. However, she was not especially cast down by her ill success. She had acquired a new value in her own eyes, which shone from them in a kind of smiling superiority.

Her start in life had been placed within her power; her ultimate triumph was sure.

For the rest of the day she was happy. She had no opportunity to speak with Lanman or to thank him for his good offices in her behalf, for Jessie occupied the place in the carriage at his side which had been hers on the drive over.

"You have had a pleasant time, have not you?" said Walter, noticing her happiness. "A better time than usual, I should think."

She slipped her hand through his arm, and moved as close to his side as she could. "Walter," she said, impressively, "do you love me very much indeed?"

"Of course I do," he answered, laughing. "What a question!"

"No, but listen; something has happened. Mr. Erskine has offered to take me as a pupil, and I am to live in the city and begin to study in the early fall. I can stay with Aunt Sophronia, you know; she will be glad to have me. Oh, it is such an opportunity! I can hardly believe in my good fortune. Please to look glad."

"I thought you had given up that idea," he said, looking anything but as requested. "I have not heard of it for so long."

"Only because I did not know what to do. I know now. You will be willing, won't you? Because it is the opportunity of my life — it is, indeed."

Walter straightened himself with a long sigh. "You must talk to father about it," he said; "I will have nothing to do with it."

"To father!" she exclaimed, in surprise. "Why on earth should I do that?"

"I have no real authority over you, and he has. I would never give my consent to such a plan; but I know you would not care for that: for his refusal you would be obliged to care."

She withdrew her arm from his and moved away. "You are very cross with me, Walter," she said, "and very unjust. Why should I not make the most of my life like any other person of talent?"

With an effort he checked his impulse to retort. "I know something of what the world is like," he said, speaking more kindly, "and I know how hard it is to succeed at all. You are enthusiastic, and would work yourself to death without advancing three steps."

"And why should I not advance? Think how many of the most successful people have struggled at first, and yet they became famous at last."

"Yes, but think of the army who have struggled and never succeeded. That you should ignore them proves your inexperience; for they outnumber the others a hundred to one."

"Then it is only failure that you fear for me? If you thought that I should be successful, you would let me go willingly?"

"No, I should not. I am not sure that success would not be worse for you than failure. If it were necessary that you should go out to work for your living, it would be a different thing. It would be your misfortune then, for you could not stand it long; but now, with no cause except a mistaken fancy, it would be insanity."

"It would not be insanity," she contradicted, bluntly. "I shall talk to father about it. You will not influence him, will you?"

“ If he asks me what I think, I shall tell him.”

“ Then I shall not say anything about it until it is nearly time for me to leave. You will be gone by that time.”

Walter vouchsafed no reply, but leaned forward and addressed some remark to Lanman concerning the place which they were passing.

CHAPTER VII.

A WEEK had gone. The boys had left home severally and separately, and Aunt Sophronia had arrived and settled herself for her annual visit. At her approach Mr. Verrick always retired more than ever within himself, and the care of the visitor was left entirely to the two sisters. Sophy was tacitly acknowledged to be the possessor of her aunt's stronger affections, and she lent herself heartily enough to such arrangements as were proposed for the disposition of the days. She found it wearisome at times. There were long mornings spent in the sitting-room, when her past conduct and the condition of her wardrobe underwent investigation. There were ceremonious calls which must be received and returned, and evening walks along the drive in unaccustomed wraps, when it was forbidden to go upon the grass for fear of damp.

These were the most trying of the events; still there was much which was enjoyable. Aunt Sophronia was by no means superannuated. She had a brisk, out-and-away stir about her which invigorated Sophy. Here was something tangible to be enforced or combated, very different from the mild ambiguity of her father's expressed opinions or Jessie's judicious silence. There was a snap to Aunt Sophronia, which any little argument only served to call forth in fuller force. She was indeed a person possessed

of much untried energy, which found vent — there being no other chance of its escape — in a quick tongue fearlessly used. Hidden away somewhere she did possess a kind heart; but owing to the fact that the heart and its qualities are so essentially less prominent than certain mannerisms and expressions which lie upon the surface, there were many who did not suspect the possibility of kindly thought in her who had so often withered them in argument, or dashed among their most sacred prejudices without reserve. She was one who had been endowed with sufficient force to undergo a life of vicissitudes, but during whose even course no vicissitudes had arisen. She believed firmly in herself. The brusquerie from which others were apt to shrink she regarded as an emanation from that steady quality of nerve which animates the surgeon at his work, — so like to cruelty in appearance, so different from it in reality.

Mr. Verrick was especially sensitive to this manner, and after one or two encounters with it, he never knowingly ventured upon any ground which might induce retort.

Once or twice at the outset of her visits he would be betrayed into the receipt of one of these rebuffs; but after that he rarely spoke at all. As for Mrs. Hurlingham, she found her brother-in-law enervating in the extreme, and his meditative remarks always in need of sensible corrective.

As, for instance, Sophy, in looking over the paper on the morning after her aunt's arrival, announced sensationally that there had been a railway accident, which had entailed "terrible loss of life."

Mr. Verrick was hardly thrilled. "It might not be so very bad," he suggested, with the incredulity of a more experienced news-reader. "The papers are very apt to call the loss of life terrible, even if it is no more than one man."

"So it is terrible for that man," asserted Aunt Sophronia, sharply.

Mr. Verrick was silent.

A little later in the meal the subject of driving was started. Aunt Sophronia, it seemed, disapproved of a woman's driving.

"Yet I can remember when you used to enjoy it," Mr. Verrick said, reflectively, with no suspicion of danger.

His sister-in-law turned upon him so quickly that he was instantly demoralized.

"At least," he said, "I thought you used to like it. I do not remember as well as I did; I am breaking up gradually."

She was not melted by the suggestion.

"You would have to be very much in your prime to remember that," she said, briskly; whereat he seemed to shrivel together like burning paper, and spoke no more.

And now, after ten days of the perfection of summer weather, came one of gray, despondent dripping, when the sky wore the thickest, most sombre of veils, and all the beautiful differences of tint which brightened the fairer landscape were blended and drowned in lead-color. Not an out-of-door venture was to be thought of to-day, and it was most unlikely that any one would call.

Sophy, standing at the sitting-room window, was listening idly to the conversation of the other two

ladies. All the morning she had been pursuing an artistic inspiration. But since luncheon she had been unoccupied, either lying among the cushions of the lounge with an unread book, or wandering, as at present, from window to window, seeking a prospect of improvement in the uncompromising weather. And now Satan, who, we are told, finds some mischief still, put into the mind of Mrs. Sophronia Hurlingham a thought which was to give rise to as lively a domestic skirmish as even the father of such skirmishes could have desired.

"I have heard," she began, "that Frostmore is occupied now. I was surprised at that, — the Frosts have always lived so much in society, and this is such a quiet place. Do you see anything of them?"

Jessie answered briefly as to the extent of their acquaintance.

"And they have visitors, you say, — pleasant people?"

Again her older niece replied, more at length this time, but still as concisely as might be.

"I can remember Lawrence Frost when he was a boy," her aunt went on. "He was quite as much as his father could manage in those days. In college he was wild, quite wild, — went with a fast set. What did you say was the name of his friend who is here now? — Lanman? That's the name! I knew it was familiar when you first mentioned it. People used to say that he was responsible for every lawless thing that happened during the whole of his college course; and since then I suppose he has squandered his own money, and lives upon his friends!"

"And how do you know that Mr. Lanman lives

upon his friends?" asked Sophy, turning her face toward the occupants of the room. "Have you been consulting them?"

"No," returned her aunt, shortly. "Have you?"

"I would rather do it and know what I was talking about, than to slander any one."

"And pray why should you suppose that I speak without authority? Mrs. Dean knew him very well, and my information is from her. She told me several things besides which were far from complimentary either to Mr. Lanman or to Mr. Frost."

Sophy's wrath arose until it over-topped the power of her control. She left the window and confronted her aunt upon the rug. "Mrs. Dean is a horrid old gossip, and is not fit to be believed. Bah! It is enough to make one furious to hear such things!"

"It is enough to make you furious, evidently," was the retort. "Although why you should take so very violent an interest in the subject I cannot imagine."

"Then I will tell you: it is because, of all the people I know, Mr. Frost's family are the most attractive. He is one of the few persons that I have ever seen whom I care to see again, and I will not quietly hear mean things said of him or his friends; that is all. I do not expect you to understand me."

"Quite right," returned her aunt, promptly; "I should not think you would. It is quite time, young lady," she added, more sharply, "that you grew into your senses."

Sophy's eyes danced with anger. "I am as sensible as I ever shall be, Aunt Sophronia," she said.

"How discouraging!" was the exasperating rejoinder.

Jessie had witnessed in her days many conflicts between her sister and their aunt, but never one with so chimerical and questionable a foundation as this. In extreme discomfort of spirit, she made one or two efforts to check the storm; but in vain.

"I know what you think," went on the younger combatant, — "you think that no girl can like any man without wishing to marry him; but you see it may happen."

"It will be a fine capital for you to start with in your career, this admiration for a married man!"

Sophy laughed scornfully. "You amuse me," she said, not deigning to notice the last remark.

"That is a blessed privilege," returned her aunt.

"There is no use in your talking, Aunt Sophronia," said Sophy. "You are never satisfied without some one to berate. You go into the byways and hedges and compel quarrels. 'It is not my fault; I have not said a thing that I did not mean.' That is your own favorite remark. You ought to approve of it; I learned it from you."

Aunt Sophronia resumed her suspended work and continued it calmly. "I should have given you credit for as much invention as that yourself," she answered.

There was a short silence, broken by Mrs. Hurlingham's remarking that it was four o'clock.

"That clock is fast," said Sophy, rather satisfied to correct her late opponent.

"I mean that it is four by that clock," answered

her aunt, sharply, declining to be considered wrong. "I don't know anything about what time it ought to be and is n't."

Sophy arose at this and marched to the door. "I am going to the study," she said, towering above the former subject; "I have some writing to do. You need not call me at tea-time." And she left the room, closing the door with decision as she went.

There was no quality which Mrs. Hurlingham admired so much in woman as that which she called "spirit." Therefore the recent outburst disturbed her not at all as far as the outburst itself was concerned; but her niece's matrimonial success had been for some time the subject of her careful consideration. Heretofore she had acknowledged to herself that the time for action was not yet. But she had come upon the present visit fully prepared to broach the subject and have a clear understanding with her brother-in-law, after which she would carry her pupil away with her for the better furthering of her views. But here was a development which demanded a little investigation.

"Sophy always was an independent child," she said, with something of pride in her voice. "She never liked restraint."

"But she needs restraint," remonstrated Jessie, anxiously. "She must have restraint, or there is no telling what she may do. Walter realizes it. We both try our best to make her understand it."

"You had better let her alone," was the answer. "I am not at all sure that that is not exactly where the trouble lies. If you let her know that you are trying to drive her, you will certainly fail. She should

be allowed to have her own way, — apparently, you understand. Then she can easily be led into doing what she should."

Jessie thought of the wholesale manner in which her aunt had put into effect this theory, and what questionable success she had met in guiding the bark after such a clapping on of all sail. There was a silence. Jessie was timid in argument; but herein she felt bound to make some remonstrance. "We think," she said, with decision, "that Sophy needs firm guidance in all things. She should never be allowed to decide anything for herself, — indeed she is not capable of it."

"She will probably do it," answered Mrs. Hurlingham, with a toss of the chin not unlike Sophy's own, "whether you allow it or not. Now tell me about this Lanman affair. How many times has she seen him?"

Jessie looked shocked. "I do not know," she answered. "I have never thought of it. We have been to Frostmore once or twice, and the Frosts have been here. They are only acquaintances. Sophy speaks very positively, but of course it does not mean anything. It is only her manner. You must understand that, Aunt Sophronia."

"Oh, yes! I understand all about it. I understand that while you are too delicate to say or do anything to the point, she will be falling into love and out of it to suit herself; that while you are believing that things are not proper, and therefore cannot be, they *will* be, and directly under your nose; and then you will have only yourself to thank. I shall take Sophy home with me. It is a great mistake that she has ever left me at all."

Now this was the very thing which Jessie had decided should not be. She had no present reply to make, however, and her aunt went on, —

“You are too reticent with her,” she said. “You ought to speak to her plainly upon whatever subject arises. If you had spoken to her, for instance, of any especial liking for Mr. Lanman.”

Jessie gasped. “I could not speak of such a thing to any one,” she said, very low.

“That is precisely the reason why you are not a fit person to be with Sophy. I am glad that I know of this, and thoroughly provoked at the stupid conventionality which would have kept it from me.”

“You are making a mountain of a mole-hill, Aunt Sophronia,” said Jessie, anxious to leave further discussion.

“That is better than making a mole-hill of a mountain,” returned her aunt, sharply.

Sophy meanwhile lay extended upon the sofa in her father's study, — a dusty, disorderly room, looking now, in the departing light, quite picturesque in its confusion. There the sacrilegious feminine hand was never allowed to “clean,” and the duster, which descends alike upon the valueless and the invaluable, was unknown. A little surreptitious brushing of carpet and furniture was at times undertaken by one of the sisters, but the papers and bottles, the books and specimens, were never touched save by their owner.

Although, as has been said, Mr. Verrick had taken his degree as a physician in earlier days, he had, upon arriving at the time when he might practise, found more pleasure, if less profit, in pursuing his studies in remoter branches of the healing art. During his

later years he had become quite widely known as one of the most skilful chemical experts of his time, and his services were frequently called into requisition in deciding important points in the interest of science or the law.

On this particular afternoon he had been summoned to the city upon an important matter requiring more than usual research in its demonstration. He had been gone already over one night, and the exact time of his return was doubtful. Sophy was conscious of a feeling of great tenderness toward him as she looked about her. Little as she knew him in his inner self, there were many touches revealed to her among these his familiars which drew her to him. Often afterward the memory of this solitary afternoon came back to her, when she had thought of her father and loved him, not knowing that her eyes should rest upon his living face never again.

She lay alone until the tea-hour had long gone by. Then she arose, mollified by silence and reflection, and gathering up her neglected writing materials, sought the sitting-room. Arrived at the closed door, however, she changed her mind. "No, I am tired of it," she thought, walking away. "I know how everything looks in there, and I hear how it sounds. I will go and find Augustine."

So she found Augustine, and ate a generous supper which had been saved for her; after which she wandered aimlessly through the long hall, and opening the outer door, stood in the damp, earth-scented breeze, looking out into the dusky evening. As she stood, a boy came up the drive toward her. A messenger with a note — no, a telegram. Believing it to be from her father, she received and opened it. It

was long for a telegram, — regardlessly long, with none of the eliminating of short words which careful economy would prompt. “Your brother is ill,” it read, “although it is nothing in the least serious. Could not you come for a day or two? Remember, there is not the slightest cause for alarm.” Lanman had signed it, and it was addressed to either Jessie or herself.

Sophy well knew that Jessie had been more especially intended by the summons, as was entirely proper, and that she herself was thought of only as a substitute, should her sister be from home or otherwise unable to reply. Nevertheless, with a semi-defiant notion of proving to Walter her untried ability, she decided in the space of a lightning’s flash that she would be the one to go, and that she would start at once. She made the messenger wait while she wrote an answer announcing her proposed departure. This she despatched without signature. Where was now that overpowering sense of indolence which she had borne about with her all through the afternoon? She flew to her room with a bounding heart, and without a second’s pause for consideration crowded into a small bag a few indiscriminate articles, and wrote upon the envelope containing the telegram, “I have gone. S.” This she pinned to the curtain of her toilet-table; and leaving the room lighted and the door widely open, she departed, catching up her hat and gloves from a chair in the hall as she went. The sitting-room door still remained closed. Aunt Sophronia and Jessie were having a long session. Sophy paused not upon such dangerous ground, but shut herself as quietly as might be out into the wet.

It had not yet grown entirely dark, and the rain was over. The moon was struggling among the scattering clouds. Now they would overwhelm it and swallow it up; now it would push through them and show itself still serene, ready to plunge into another billowy mass, like a daring swimmer in a strong surf. As the fugitive ran out at the gate, she dashed with considerable violence against a man who seemed to have been about to enter.

In the recoil which followed the shock of their sudden meeting, the two persons recognized each other. Sophy laughed uncomfortably. "What fearful haste, Mr. Frost!" she said. "You nearly ran me down."

At a glance he took in the general run-away air, the bag, the embarrassment. "Is it not you who are in haste?" he said, standing directly in her path. "May I ask if you are going away?"

"You may," she answered, readily. "Walter is ill, and I am to go to him to-night. Father and Rob are away, and I must go to the station alone. That is all. Good-night;" and she hastened past him and down the road.

He turned at once and followed her. "It must not be good-night," he said, taking her bag from her. "I will go with you to the station. But why did you try to walk so far? Why did you not have a carriage?"

"I had not time," she answered, briefly. If only he would cease his questions before he should force her to tell him the circumstances of her departure! She feared that he might do it if he would. What if he should succeed in persuading her to relinquish this first grasp at independence? With her customary

frankness she acknowledged the fear to herself, and the humiliating admission gave her further strength of resolve. He should have no opportunity to consider her easily bent. She would carry out her intention now, although the skies were to fall.

CHAPTER VIII.

ARRIVED at the station, Mr. Frost left his self-imposed charge for a short interview with the official in attendance. When he returned, his air was quite determined. "You cannot go on to-night," he said, firmly.

She started to her feet. "No train?" she exclaimed, interrogatively.

"None until nine o'clock, and that one does not arrive until after midnight."

She re-seated herself tranquilly. "That one will do," she said; "I will take that."

"But you cannot; there will be no one to meet you."

"I can telegraph them."

"It would be of no use; the telegram would not arrive before you. It will be necessary for you to postpone the journey until to-morrow."

The memory of her former resolution was with her. "I cannot postpone it," she said.

There was a silence. "How did it happen that you started at such an hour?" he asked, seating himself beside her. "How did you obtain your sister's consent?"

This was warm ground. She had no refuge save in injured dignity. "Do you think that I am not going to my brother, Mr. Frost?" she said, looking

up at him with wide, clear eyes which seemed almost black in the scant light of the room. "Do you think that I have told you what was not true?"

"Good heavens, no!" he answered, earnestly; "I only thought that perhaps you might have been trying to defend your affairs from a too-inquisitive friend. I have read somewhere that defence of that kind is always allowable, and has nothing to do with truth or untruth."

"That would be diplomacy, would it not? I could never hope to accomplish it. If I could, I should use it now in telling you how anxious I am to have you get my ticket for me. Will you do it?"

There was a short pause; and then, seeming to arrive at some conclusion within himself, he left her without a word and made the desired purchase. "The ticket-office was not open," he said, returning to her, "but I found the man, and he was obliging."

Sophy's satisfaction at the sight of the little yellow square which he handed her was complete. As she examined it more closely, however, her expression changed. "It is not right," she said, holding it toward him; "that is not the name of the place."

"That is the name of the nearest station. You cannot go all the way by rail. Did not you know even that?" He waited for her to speak, but she was silent. Then he said quietly, in a matter-of-fact way, "Do you need money?"

She flushed deeply and produced her store. "I have plenty of money," she said, forgetting to thank him. "I did not give it to you before, for fear that you would not let me go."

"So you thought me a highway robber! Thank you."

"I only thought that you might become one in the cause of duty. It is so hard to tell what people will do in the pursuit of duty, and it seems to be every one's duty to interfere with me."

He only looked at her with kind compassion.

"I do not mean that you have interfered," she added hastily, mistaking his silence. "You have helped me more than you know;" and she laughed, at first gently, then with increased mirth.

Hers was as agreeable a laugh to see as to hear. She did not rock herself about, nor show any inclination to cover her face, as seems to be the manner of many young women. Hers was a dry-eyed, low-voiced merriment, ornamented by the even rows of white teeth which it disclosed. "It strikes me as so funny," she said, "that I should not have known where I was going. If you had not bought my ticket I should not know now."

"What could you have done if I had not chanced to meet you?" was his next very natural question.

"I cannot tell. I should have gone to Frostmore for information, I suppose."

"You might not have thought of that."

"I should have thought of it. I would not have gone home. I was resolved to be the one to go to Walter instead of Jessie."

"So that is it," he said, without betraying surprise, which might frighten her confidence. "You are forestalling your sister?"

"Yes. The telegram came directed to either of us, so I put it where they would see it after I had gone. They did not know of it when I left."

He understood the whole now. "I am very glad

that you have told me this," he said, rising from beside her.

Instantly she started up and caught his arm. "Where are you going?" she exclaimed, holding him fast.

There were no other travellers in the little waiting-room. The train which left at six o'clock had taken many, and those to go later had not yet begun to assemble. He looked down upon her with quiet, smiling eyes. "I am only going as far as the telephone," he said, "to arrange that you may have an escort."

"Oh!" she cried, delighted, "are you going with me?"

After all, what a child, what a helpless child she was!

"I should do so," he answered, kindly, "but I have business in the city to-morrow which I cannot postpone. We have a guest at the house who was to have gone to Mr. Wynne's to-morrow. He must go to-night instead; that is all."

She would have remonstrated against this, but he was firm. "It is Mr. Lanman's nephew, who has been at the city, and intended to stop with us over night. He is quite a boy. You will like him, I am sure. He is very handsome, to begin with. You like that, do you not?"

"As far as it goes, yes."

"It goes very far with him. He is quite a beauty."

"But I cannot bear to have him disturbed on my account. It is so much to ask, and so unnecessary."

"If you will allow me to differ from you, I think that you are mistaken in both points."

"But what will *he* think? He may agree with me —"

"Ah! you do not know him; he always agrees with me."

Then, not to be dissuaded, he left her to summon her fellow-traveller. There was a flat, stupid-looking clock hung away over the door, and in the absence of other occupation she consulted its sickly, bluish face. An hour and a half had passed since her arrival at the station, and it had gone like a passing breeze; but what if she had been obliged to wait all that time in solitude? She threw one small thought toward those at home. There was no imagining what course they would pursue. Hers was a deed without a precedent.

At length the light flared and danced in the draught as Mr. Frost opened the door for the second time and rejoined her. "It is arranged," he said, cheerfully; "he will be here as soon as possible."

Her face fell. "I had hoped that he would not be at home," she said. "What would you have done then?"

He smiled thoughtfully. "It is hardly a supposable case," he answered; "but if it had happened so, I should have been obliged to make some other arrangement."

Then he spoke of her intended escort, of his wit, his acquirements, his many friends and probable future; and so faithfully did he pursue the subject that before it seemed at all in danger of exhaustion the half-hour was drawing to a close, and the object of his remarks stood before them.

Sophy regarded him critically as he made his bow,

and at once decided that description had not exaggerated the fact of his personal beauty.

He was a blond youth, a glorified edition of his uncle, with the good points in physique and feature accentuated, and the inferior ones refined away. Lanman's eyes were blue, — blue pure and simple; but his nephew's were of a deeper, an almost violet hue, and had in them a sparkling, dancing laugh which formed their owner's most irresistible attraction. Lanman's hair was yellow and straight; but his nephew's had a golden dash through it, and rioted in capricious luxuriance even where it was so closely mowed that it could hardly do more than assert its natural tendency in snubbed but obstinate waviness. He had, moreover, a slim, straight figure of medium height, costumed *à la* tourist, — a style eminently adapted to its symmetrical proportions.

He had come prepared to accompany her; there was no help for it. Realizing this fact, she brightened a little and surrendered to the inevitable. Only as the train was about leaving she gave way to her regret in losing her older friend.

"I do not know how to thank you," she said.

"Do not think of it," he answered, cordially; "it has been a pleasure to me. I shall call very soon at your house to inquire about you. Clifford, you know what to do. You had better send me a word to-morrow, or telegraph from the station when you arrive to-night. That would be best."

A moment more, and he had bidden them each a kindly farewell, and the moving train was leaving him farther and farther in the distance.

Sophy would willingly have kept silence and given herself over to retrospect and reflection; but her

companion had no thought of permitting that. "I never met with such a piece of good fortune in my life," he said, with a thousand smiles and dimples. "Mr. Frost told me to come prepared to start for home, as he had an errand for me to do which must be done to-night, and that he would wait for me at the depot to explain. I expected, of course, that it would be a message or a package; but instead it was this." He finished with a genial little nod, which expressed his gratification more pleasantly than words.

"Then you were not displeased at having your short visit cut shorter," she answered. "I was afraid that you might be."

"Displeased!" he echoed, disdainfully; "I was delighted. Not that Frostmore is not a jolly place to visit, but I was not to be there long enough to make it interesting, and there are no young people stopping there now."

"Miss Griswold," she suggested.

"Yes, certainly, Miss Griswold," he assented; "but she — You know her, do you not? and Mr. Erskine? Then you know all about it. Miss Griswold never looks at a man who is under thirty, not even to speak to. Am I not a gossip, Miss Verrick?" he added, laughing. "I was cut out for an old maid."

"You are rather young for an 'old' anything," she answered, with a friendly glance.

He returned the glance with interest. "I am as old as you are, I will bet," he said.

"Do not bet," she returned, lightly, "you will lose;" and as she spoke, it occurred to her for the first time how rapidly she was being hurried to the losing of her own recent wager.

She was silent for a minute ; then she said : " Your uncle is at Mr. Wynne's now, is he not ? Mr. Lanman, I mean. He is your uncle ? "

" He is my half-uncle ; but he could not be jollier if he were whole. He is at Mr. Wynne's now for the fishing. There is some one with him. They came just before I left. "

" The ' some one ' is my brother. I am going to him ; he is ill. "

" So that is it, " he exclaimed, cheerfully. " I wondered, although I did not like to ask. Ah ! " he added, with youthful selfishness, " you will like it there. We can have a splendid time. Do you ride ? "

She shook her head with determination. " I am going to take care of my brother, " she said ; " I shall devote myself to him. "

" Yes, of course, " he answered, with a disappointed look ; " I forgot that. But your brother probably will be quite well soon, and even now there may be some time when you will be at leisure. He and Uncle Lan are at the fishing-camp. You would not want to stay there all the time. "

" As long as Walter is ill I shall stay with him, and when he is better I must leave at once for home. "

There were not many passengers besides themselves upon that late train, and such as there were seemed disposed to sleep the time away. The two young people, however, appeared to have as much to say to each other as if the hour were high noon, and topics of conversation unlimited. Who has not noticed such ingenuous young travellers ? Which of their opinions and confidences is too trifling to be inter-

esting in its recital; which of their innocent and rapid jokes too poor to command a laugh?

So these two filled the hours of rushing through the darkness; and had it not been for the excitement in arriving at a new destination, Sophy would perhaps have joined entirely in her friend's regret when the end of the first stage of their journey was reached. Indeed, she might still have done so, had she appreciated the three-mile ride still before them, or the difference between the uneventful comforts of travel in a train, and that contrasting state to be endured within the highly flavored vehicle hired at the station. What was a little chill more or less? Neither she nor Clifford was provided with anything in the nature of a wrap. What great matter was it that the atmosphere within the carriage was scented with rankly redolent straw, or that the over-driven horses, urged to no further weary scamperings in favor of such late travellers, crawled along the road with a deliberation which, after the steam-driven speed of the cars, seemed hardly more than a snail's pace!

They were not expected at the house, but the housekeeper was finally aroused, and received them as hospitably as might reasonably be anticipated.

"Now, Mrs. Coombs," Clifford cried, lighting all the candles in the library chandelier, as a means of heightening the temperature, "what is there for Miss Verrick which will be warm? It was as cold as the mischief riding from the station."

"There's a plenty of blankets, sir!" answered Mrs. Coombs, ignoring the idea of refreshments.

He laughed, and danced a small jig with his hands in his pockets. "Miss Verrick does not eat

blankets, thank you, nor drink them either. We want some supper, and you need not mind about icing the wine. Boo! what an idea!"

"If you will excuse me," said Sophy, rather aghast at the idea of appropriating so freely the hospitalities of a stranger, "I think the blankets the best suggestion after all. If there is a room ready, I will go to it now."

Clifford was grieved. "Of course, if you are so tremendously anxious, you will have to go," he said, shivering ostentatiously. "But you are to have some supper, and so am I; and I think it very unsocial in you to go and eat all alone. We might have a nice waltz here while Mrs. Coombs made things ready, and after that —"

"An ice, of course," she interrupted, laughing at the telling effect of the words. "Imagine us dancing here alone at two o'clock in the morning!"

"I cannot alter the hour," he said, "but I can the clock, if that will do any good; and as for music, leave that to me. Mrs. Coombs, disappear! Remember, we want everything there is to eat; and you may as well bring it in here. Miss Verrick, may I have the pleasure? — Oh, not yet, though. Mrs. Coombs, plenty of lemons and hot water; boiling, if you please! Now we will remove a little of this superfluous furniture;" and he rushed about, sliding the lighter chairs into corners, and disposing of the foot-rests and ottomans with surprising speed.

"I feel like a burglar," exclaimed Sophy, standing on the door-sill as if in expectation of being surprised.

"So do I," answered her companion, cheerfully; "it is a jolly profession, I think." Then, without

further preliminaries, he placed his arm about her waist, and bore her down the broad hall to the sound of a lively whistling.

This was no gentle drawing-room performance, but a flying rush for warmth and restored circulation. Clifford's muscles were like flexible steel, and he easily supplied the strength for his companion's locomotion as well as for his own; until she, finding herself invigorated, was as able as he to skim like a bird over the selected course.

Away they went! to the farthest end of the hall and back into the library, around the heavy table, and out again into an unobstructed perspective; and so again and again, lightly and tirelessly they danced, until Sophy, laughing and breathless, stopped at the library door and announced herself as satisfied.

"Whew!" gasped Clifford, fanning her with a magazine. "That is the end of the late shiver-freeze. To think that we shall have to cool off with boiling lemonade! I wonder if there is anything on the ice!"

Sophy leaned back in her chair with a gesture expressive of despair. "I cannot get used to the idea," she said, "of making myself so entirely at home with a stranger's belongings."

"But they are my belongings too. I live here. You ought to see the fellows that I have down sometimes. They do not hesitate to walk into everything, I assure you. I should have to hold them out by main force."

"I daresay! I seem to myself very inferior by contrast, but I hope that you will excuse me. I am not accustomed to it. I think that if you were to put out half a dozen of those lights it might make

some difference in the temperature, and we could see quite as well by the other half-dozen."

"It will not seem so warm in a few minutes," he said, not complying with her suggestion; "a half-lighted room always seems so cheerless. We might sit out on the stairs, or go around into the dining-room. It will be cool enough there, no matter how many lights we have."

"What extravagance!" she said, reproachfully.

"I know it is; but I like to be comfortable. I like rooms with dark fittings and all the lights necessary to make it brilliant. It is a great deal pleasanter than a light room, which glares your eyes out. Then I would have immense fires all the time, with plenty of steam-heat, and leave all the windows open. That would be my way."

"What extraordinary housekeeping!" she said, laughing. "When you are eventually settled in a house of your own, I hope that you will ask me to visit there."

"With pleasure; I will give you the invitation now." This remark, putting Sophy in mind of the future and its uncertainties, carried her thoughts toward the very unexpected occurrences of that day.

"How little we can foresee," she said. "If any one had suggested to me this morning that I should spend to-night under a strange roof, I should have denied the possibility of it; and even after I had started I should have flatly refused to believe that I was coming here to dance. Oh, I hope that everything does not turn out so different from what we think! There are some things which *must* go as we wish, if we make them with all our might."

Clifford held up a listening finger. "Do you hear that musical jingling?" he said. "Away with melancholy for the present! I am sure of one thing, that if we do our best, the future will take care of us. At present our duty is supper. Let us do our best over that, to begin with."

Before the housekeeper left her for the night, Sophy inquired as to her brother's condition. The woman had not seen him, however. Mr. Lanman had been up to the house for whatever was needed. The gentleman was not bad off at all, only the rheumatism was in his back when he tried to move. This was all that the sleepy informant had to impart, and Sophy was tired enough to be glad to dismiss her; too tired she was to think further upon any of the startling events of the day, or even to consider the strangeness of her new surroundings.

CHAPTER IX.

WALTER VERRICK lay upon his low camp-bed and followed his sister about with eyes which it still seemed to him must be playing him tricks. Three days had passed since he had been astonished by her appearance at his side, and they had been agreeably different from those three previous days, when he had lain there and her presence had been wanting.

Until the morning after her arrival Walter had not known of Lanman's telegram ; and even when he had been told of it he did not imagine for an instant that the answering arrival would bring Sophy to his side.

But how glad he had been to see her ! How pleasantly and tirelessly she read to him hour after hour ! The time fairly flew, compared with its former laggard pace ; for although Lanman had been unremitting in his attentions, he had been obliged to be absent at times, and there was no companionship in the presence of the man then in charge. But now, with Clifford's return and Sophy's delightfully amazing presence, he found himself directly in as entertaining society as the heart of a disappointed sportsman need desire.

The situation of the camp was very solitary. The trout-stream rushed and tumbled beneath overhanging verdure not ten yards before it, and at its back

was unbroken forest. There were no paths which obtruded themselves upon the notice, no sign of the presence of man, save only the small two-roomed lodge, and the now-unused log-kitchen set back among the forest-trees. Away at the most remote end of the clearing, a wagon-road had been cut, communicating with the distant highway, from which branched a foot-path leading directly to the house. Still, these were purposely obscure; and lying as Walter lay, with only uncultivated nature visible through the closed window at his side, the nearest habitation might be distant twenty miles rather than two.

He was a great deal better. At no time had his ailment been of a serious nature, having consisted only in a sharp stab of rheumatic pain brought on by any attempt at change of position. During the last day he had been able by easy stages and aided by slow, strong pulling, to turn himself completely from side to side.

So marked an improvement was hailed with delight by them all, especially by Lanman, whose inexperience had at first filled his mind with fears for his friend's safety. When the suffering had been most intense, he had written and telegraphed north, south, east, and west for the immediate service of a physician, but without success; and before it was possible to obtain one from the distant city the alarm was over, and he congratulated himself upon the failure of his attempt.

Lanman's opinions of medicine and its practice were such as might be expected from one who had never suffered five minutes' discomfort in his life. Still, his theories were of the passive, let-well-enough-

alone order, — less pernicious as a rule in their results than the bustling, well-meant experiments of many of his equals in ignorance who hold to more active methods. Now that he had discovered the nature of Walter's ailment, he had very fixed ideas as to the manner of its treatment.

"All that you need to cure you is heat," he said, cheerfully. "You must not object to being roasted for a while, and you will be on your feet again very soon. If I had been able to find Dr. Hayden, he would have given you morphine and such stuff, and it would have taken you two weeks to get over the effect of that alone. As it is, without any effects to get over, you will be well in half that time."

So Walter took his friend's advice perforce, and was with willing impatience blanketed and shielded from air to within an inch of his possible endurance, for more speedy routing of the enemy. About the opposite window, where sat his sister and her young aide-de-camp, he could see, by the gentle bowing and swaying of their little curls, that there must be stirring air. But there was none of this for him. It is only choice fruit in process of forcing, or out-of-season plants in bloom, which are supposed to thrive in so extreme a temperature as he was doomed to endure.

The cottage rooms were fitted only with the essentials for a night's resting-place. In each there were two couches. Upon that nearest Walter, Clifford Lanman had elected to pass his present days, and lay listening to the reading which Sophy, seated between them, administered for her brother's entertainment. There was not space to admit of distance in any direction. But thus compactly placed, the party

still left room for Lanman's exits and entrances, and for the proper disposal of the meals when they made their timely appearance.

It had been expected that Sophy would occupy an apartment at the house during her stay as nurse. But of this she would not hear, and at night withdrew to the adjoining room, while Lanman disposed himself upon the couch near the patient. Clifford thought it hard that he should be the only one obliged to enjoy the irksome luxury of his customary quarters. With the smallest encouragement he would have bivouacked upon the little porch with the dogs; but his wishes were disregarded, and every night he was driven unwillingly forth to the comfortable solitude which he disparaged. Concerning the serving of his meals he was allowed to have his way, and made a prompt and lively fourth at their daily picnics, to his great satisfaction.

These were picnics of the more luxurious kind, be it understood, enjoyed in comfortable and quiet order, with no one obliged to raise a finger in the service. They were not slighted, these Robinson Crusoes. Their hamper, brought them from the house, never failed to contain the freshest and rarest of summer delicacies. Golden bites of chops, with delicate bones like polished ivory; youthful chickens, baby peas; strawberries as large as plums, and divers bottles of aristocratic contour, in pails of pounded ice. None of these, except the latter-mentioned refreshment, was denied to the invalid. He lay upon his pillows, and ate and laughed, and could not but acknowledge that the very best was being made of a trying situation.

Sophy's first excitement over communication with

home was past. Their telegram in answer to her own carried no destruction with it, and there had been but one letter, hardly more than a note it was, from her aunt.

"Your sister and I desire," — the note said, — "that notwithstanding the fact that you have so unwarrantably concluded to take into your own hands that which should have been a family matter, you will nevertheless accept advice as to your future conduct. Since your brother appears not to need more skilful nursing than you are able to bestow, it is to be presumed that he will in a very short time be in a condition to dispense with any service of the kind whatever, when it is desired that you start at once for home, travelling at suitable hours and under suitable escort. Should any relapse occur, you will telegraph us without loss of time.

"SOPHRONIA HURLINGHAM."

Sophy read this message with some indignation, but with more amusement. After a second perusal she held it toward Lanman, with a frown and a laugh.

"Aunt Sophronia has a high opinion of my powers as nurse," she said. "You had better read her letter; it may inspire you with confidence."

"What does she say?" asked Walter, interested.

"She says that since even I am able to take care of you, there cannot be very much care needed; or words to that effect. To tell you the truth, she is on such a high horse that I do not know exactly what she does say. It is a grand style, do you not think so?" she asked, addressing Lanman; "I do not know two more telling words in the English language than 'nevertheless' and 'notwithstanding.' I will read it to you, Walter, if you would

like to hear it. I only hope that it will not petrify you."

Walter had already learned the story of his sister's journey. She had written and telegraphed by his advice, and then had charmed him into forgetting everything but the delight of her presence. Now, however, the little thought-wrinkle lined itself deeply on his forehead. He was realizing with self-reproach for the first time how displeased they were at home.

"Look at me," his sister said, going to his side and taking his unresisting hand. "Forget that stupid letter. Why should you allow it to trouble you? You know that Aunt Sophronia must always have her say. It only amounts to that. Oh! I thought that you would understand it better."

His hand closed gently over her own. Upon one of the fingers was a small diamond which he had bought for her with the first money he had earned. She had not known how long he had been obliged to wait before the little extravagance could be met, and he in receipt of unmortgaged wages. As he held her hand she felt the pressure upon the ring. Had he not always been devoted to her?

"I will do whatever you ask me," she said, impulsively. "I will go home at once, if you wish it, only do not worry about me. There is no necessity for that; none, remember."

At the suggestion that she should leave him she felt his grasp tighten involuntarily. "I need you more than they do now," he said, "and yet it may be best that you should go. I must think about it."

"No, you shall not. I will not let you think. I want my being here to do you good instead of harm."

"It has done me good. I shall think very gently, and not backslide a bit, if you will leave me for a little while. It is time for you to go out, is it not?"

"Not for an hour yet. Oh! why need you think, except with me? I am so anxious to hear you."

"Not now," he said, with quiet firmness. "If you wanted to please me very much, you would go and stay as long as you can possibly care to. You have only driven to the house each day. You do not have any exercise, and it worries me that it should be so, you are so little used to it. Then, while you are gone, I can consider, and have a little sleep afterward, to rest, if I choose, and by the time you are back we shall both be as happy as possible."

And having expressed so strong a wish, he had his way. Rather against Sophy's inclination, Lanman accompanied her. She declined his invitation to drive, but she had not gone ten yards from the door when he joined her.

"If you had asked me whether you might come," she said, looking over her shoulder at him, "I should have answered 'no.'"

"But luckily I did not ask," he returned, undiscouraged. "Your brother expected me to go with you, and I had something to say to you, unless you would very much rather be alone."

There was a short pause. They had taken the direction of the house, and were walking quickly through the needle-carpeted, leaf-roofed wood. When he spoke again, it was with an entire change of manner. "Sophy," he said; then he broke off abruptly. "You remember our bet?"

She laughed. "Yes, I have lost, have I not? I have come to the conclusion that it is wrong to bet."

"If you cannot win."

"Exactly."

He felt baffled in his intention by the indifferent coolness and wandering interest which she seemed to display.

"I want to be your friend," he said at length, going straight to the point, as a means of seizing her attention unaware.

The plan was only partially successful. "Do you mean," she asked, not looking at him, "that you would like to offer me some good advice?"

He made a gesture of impatience. "No, no!" he said, with emphasis; "it has nothing to do with advice. If you knew how thoroughly I understand you! I believe that I know even your thoughts sometimes. Has it never seemed to you that it would be pleasant to have a friend to whom you could tell everything, one who would always sympathize with you, and whose judgment might help you if you should need help? Often things which seem like troubles change completely when they have been freely spoken of."

His eloquence was carrying him away. As he had begun to speak without encouragement, so he continued under the same disadvantage. As he spoke her thoughts followed him. She had wished even as he said, but not since the absorbing dream of her life had seemed so near its realization.

"Ever since I have known you," he was saying, "I have been especially drawn towards you, — especially interested in everything connected with you."

She nodded quietly, "Yes, I know. You were very kind about Mr. Erskine. I have never thanked you before, but I will do so now. Did money influence him in any way? Or did he offer to teach me from out of the charity of his heart?"

"Neither, perhaps. He thought it for his own interest. But if it had been for money, what harm could it do?"

"No harm; I should not have been offended."

A pleased look came into his face. "That is right," he said, earnestly; "I am glad to hear you say that."

"At the same time I could not then have accepted the offer."

"Why not, pray?"

"Frankly, I do not know. I do not think that I attach especial importance to money. If I had it, any one might share it with me who needed it; and such obligations always seem to me of the very lightest. Still, that is not right. I have," she added, with a sigh, "no ideas which are correct."

They had kept to the wagon path, and came now upon the road. Beyond them there was a small, neglected-looking graveyard, enclosed by a dilapidated wicket fence; at her suggestion they extended their walk as far as these sleeping ones. Had he foreseen how much excuse for divided attention she would have found among them, it is possible that he would have directed his steps differently. But it was too late now.

She seated herself upon a low, table-shaped memorial, and poked busily with a small stick at the dry gray lichens which were slowly obliterating the name upon the stone,—a name forgotten long be-

fore but for its preservation here, now surrendering even this seemingly lasting record to its natural oblivion.

Lanman leaned against the vagrant apple-tree which grew beside the grave, and watched her at her work. "Mrs. Violet:" so much she scraped quite clear, recognizing through its irregular covering the conventional "Here lieth ye body of—," and leaving it for the more interesting discovery of whose "amiable consort" the lady had been in life.

Lanman, however, was not interested in the result of her labor. He waited patiently for a time, and then reached down and took the stick quietly from her. She did not attempt to retain it, but directed her look indifferently away over the hilly graves and gray, uneven stones to the fence where the long straggling arms of the briar-rose were swaying in the breeze.

"We are to be such friends, are we not?" he said. "I should like to be toward you as I am toward Clifford, — able to do what I thought best for you, and to have your perfect confidence."

"And the young lady who is waiting somewhere to captivate you, — your affinity who is bound to appear when the time comes, — what will she say?"

"She does not exist."

"Ah! so much the better; we shall not be obliged to consider her! Now, will you dispose of my obligation as readily? My present certainties and future possibilities, do they not exist either?"

"How should I interfere with them? If you think that probable, you have not understood me; that is all."

"Nor have you understood me," she said, rising, and looking directly at him at last. "I know that I often appear frivolous and thoughtless; I know that you believe me a child whom any one might direct, and that for some reason I have pleased you sufficiently for you to think it worth your while to try your particular theory for my improvement. Is it not so? Am I mistaken?"

He did not answer her immediately. He was mentally comparing the facts with her presentation.

"I am sorry that you do not like me as I am," she said, laughing, and turning from him, "for I am afraid that I cannot change."

He followed her silently as she walked toward the gate, stopping now and then to look at some stone, the appearance of which excited her curiosity. She seemed quite to ignore his presence, and he could hardly feel that his intentions had been successfully carried out.

"I wish you would attend a little to me," he said presently, as she returned from quite a *détour* of investigation.

"I am attending," she answered. "If you had been at all entertaining, I should not have gone over there. After all, it was only 'hark from the tombs.'"

"Then you will not be serious?"

"I am serious. How can I be otherwise? What do you wish to talk about? Friendship? I have read somewhere that strong affection is only possible between those who are able to avoid subjects upon which they cannot agree. So we must avoid the subject of friendship if we are to be friends."

As he was silent, she reflected. Her response to his kindness had been flippancy. But how could she take a thoughtful view of life; how burden with promises the future upon which she was resolved to enter? Still, she could not forget that he had furnished her with the first certainty connected with that future. As they re-entered the wood she spoke again.

"If I were not so dazzled by the prospects in which I believe," she said, "I might be able to answer you as you have spoken. But people seem so unimportant to me now; I shall need nothing of any one hereafter. You see," she added, in the frank manner which he had first admired in her, "how selfish I am."

"I see it," he answered, gravely, "but I am the more resolved. The world is not what you imagine it to be. Since it has been my part to aid in placing you there, I surely shall never hide myself from you if you need a friend, no matter what you may say to me now, when you know nothing of the experience. I know that you have relatives who should be the ones to aid you always, but you have shown me that they have not your confidence entirely, nor you their sympathy. For that reason I have spoken to you as I have."

He was quite formal now. If he still persevered in wishing to befriend her, it was as a duty, and not as a pleasure. But the idea was annoying to her.

"No one can do anything for me," she said; "it depends only upon myself. If I succeed, I shall not forget that you helped me when I needed it. If I fail, I shall die. But do not mourn me yet;

‘Everything comes to him who knows how to wait.’”

“Which means encouragement for me as well as for you,” he said, with a laughing sigh.

As they drew near to the cottage, Clifford Lanman came toward them through the shady wood.

“Don’t scold, Uncle Lan,” he said, joining them. “’Evins! Those eyes!” he added, in mock terror, placing a greater distance between himself and his relative. His laughing face precluded the possibility of alarm.

“Here, you young ruffian,” said Lanman, affectionately, “give an account of yourself. I have answered for it that you would be on duty this afternoon, and here I find you sky-larking about the place as if you had never learned the nature of an oath. What do you mean by it?”

“Guess!” returned Clifford, saucily, with an alert eye upon his possible opponent. “Hazard a conjecture!”

Sophy had already mentally hazarded one, that absorbed all the interest which she usually felt in these friendly passages-at-arms. “Some one has arrived,” she said, breathlessly. If Jessie had come to displace her! Clifford nodded gayly. “Quite right,” he answered; “try again.”

But Lanman, seeing her uneasiness, immediately put a stop to his nephew’s flow of spirits. “Come, come!” he said, sharply, “we have had enough of this nonsense. Who has come? Answer me.”

“It is Mr. Wynne,” was the surprised reply. “What is the trouble: is there any?”

Sophy was reassured. “Of course there is no

trouble," she said, lightly, "only curiosity likes to be satisfied at once. How were we to know who it might be? If I were you, Clifford, I should feel obliged to resent the implication that I was off duty without good reason."

Thus it was that in the midst of sparring, laughter, and joking retort, they arrived before the lodge, where Mr. Wynne, hearing the hue-and-cry, — as who might not? — came out upon the porch to meet them.

He was a distinguished-looking man of portly, handsome figure, with a strongly-featured countenance and hair like spun silver. One would notice him in any gathering of his fellow-creatures. What a chest was there! What an imposing, smoothly buttoned background for a decoration, a jewelled order, a ribbon! It took but little effort of the imagination to add these touches to the majestic presence, and to fancy oneself before some highest dignitary known to civilization, — say the Emperor of Germany, had not photography rendered royal personages so familiar, or the Czar of all the Russias. In manner and conversation Mr. Wynne proved hardly up to his weight, so to speak. He had a loud laugh, which was apt to break into the conversation with no apparent provocation. He bustled and fussed incessantly, and told long stories with invisible points, which only politeness amounting to hypocrisy could receive with answering applause. But he had a truly hospitable nature, and was never so happy as when planning amusements for his many friends; his own pleasure consisting in the management of the entertainments and the condemnation of the servitors. For his own enjoyment of these affairs he cared so

little as frequently to nap fitfully when all was progressing to his satisfaction, and to desert the most brilliant entertainment for a moment in his private sanctum with a cigar.

"My dear young lady," he said to Sophy, with an accompanying pealing laugh, "I have been talking to your excellent brother, and expressing to him my regret that he should be lodged so wretchedly here, when everything is ready and waiting for him at the house. He has promised me to allow himself to be driven there as soon as he is able to bear it. And you, I cannot permit you to remain another night with such miserable accommodations. There is no use in protesting, I will not allow it," with another burst of laughter; "simply I will not."

Finding Sophy's mild remonstrance entirely overwhelmed, Lanman came to her rescue in explanation, mentioning the fact that her present situation had been her own preference. But Mr. Wynne could not consent to indulge such a preference further. He wanted his guests to be comfortable, but he wanted them to be comfortable according to his own ideas.

"No, no," he went on, hurrying away a few steps, and then returning, "you cannot have been decently served here. Have they given you anything which you could eat?" he asked, turning quickly to Lanman, with a frown. "Of course you would correct them if all were not right; but you do not make them feel that it is important. Nothing vexes me so much, Miss Verrick, as to have service carelessly attended to in connection with the table, and I do not see how you can have lived here. However, it will be different now. Things shall be as they ought, I promise

you. Your brother tells me that he is much better to-night than he has been at any time, — much better, ha-ha ! — and we will undertake to say that he shall be still better before we are through with him — ha-ha-ha-ha ! ”

CHAPTER X.

THERE was now no further suggestion of Sophy's leaving, for Walter's improvement was so rapid that his own departure seemed to be close at hand. It would be better, he thought, that his sister should remain with him for the little time he had yet to stay.

After Mr. Wynne's appearance, that gentleman devoted himself to the comfort of his guests with an energy which might have worn them out, had not Lanman judiciously interposed and saved them what he could.

Their further picnics being impossible, they became willing to forego the appearance of picnicing; and Walter, finding himself the only obstacle to the return of the party to civilization, endured with heroism an earlier transportation to the house than Lanman was willing to consider possible.

Three days passed by, and the patient, despite the slight unconfessed relapse which had been induced by his short journey, was able to move about his room with the aid of a cane. Lanman would not allow him to join them at the table, nor would he permit the smallest liberty in the way of open windows or doors. At such a slow return to ordinary habits Walter demurred. "I must get well faster," he said to his tyrant one evening when they

were alone together ; “ I cannot bear to be so troublesome any longer. You have been as kind as possible, and Mr. Marlowe being able to spare me for another week makes that right ; but Mr. Wynne ! He is not accustomed to quite such an unsatisfactory guest. I am sure that he would invite others even now, but does not like to do so on my account.”

“ Do not let him imagine that you have such an idea,” Lanman urged, scorning the suggestion. “ Mr. Wynne prides himself upon the notion that no one has ever been anything but sorry to leave his house. Do not let him get the impression that you are even anxious to do so, unless you wish mortally to offend him.”

And so, because Walter was unable to help himself, or to resist the cordial entreaties of his host, two or three days more slipped by almost insensibly.

Mr. Wynne would not allow Sophy to devote herself to her brother as she had formerly done. To his mind, reading was not a pleasure, but a lugubrious occupation, better, perhaps, than idleness, but hardly to be chosen in preference to any more active employment, and not to be thought of when true amusement offered. For a guest of his to take up a book, was to his understanding a sign that times were dull ; and the very idea acted as whip and spur to his diligence in providing him with other occupation.

Sophy found herself, despite her intentions, allowing her charge to be ministered to by others. Altogether, she could easily see that she had outlived her real usefulness ; still, if in Walter’s judgment it was best that she should remain longer, she was by no means loath. Gradually she became quite willing to

indulge her friends in their plans for her amusement. She rode and drove ; practised shooting at a mark ; fished a little, and walked a great deal ; brightening her brother's inactivity upon her return from these expeditions with lively accounts of her adventures, in the recital of which she was assisted by Clifford, now her constant companion.

One evening, when Walter had dined with the party for the first time, and had even walked to the open door and enjoyed the fragrant air, he ventured to mention the subject of his departure, which must soon take place.

Mr. Wynne was highly indignant. "What!" he cried, in his heartiest tones, "do you think that I would allow you to start upon a journey when you are no better than you are now? It would be perfectly preposterous! I am only surprised that you do not find it pleasant enough here to forget to think of escape."

Lanman nodded slightly, a "What-did-I-tell you?" nod, while Walter refuted as warmly as he was able the idea of any anxiety to be gone. "You are very kind and hospitable," he said ; "but we should be sorry to remain until you were entirely willing to be rid of us."

Mr. Wynne's good humor was restored. "There is plenty of time yet," he said, cheerfully, "plenty of time. That reminds me, — ha-ha-ha! — that reminds me of the Eversons — ha-ha! — you remember, Lan? — ha-ha-ha —"

"You do not care about the Eversons?" said Clifford to Sophy, in an interrogative aside ; "no more do I. Let us go to walk."

Sophy silently negatived the bold proposition, and

waited for the end of the Everson recital, which to Clifford's expressed delight was reached amid roars of laughter that rendered the dénouement entirely unintelligible.

"You see what you get by not taking my advice," he said to her as they finally strolled together down the drive. "I do not believe you have the faintest idea of what the story was about; I knew that you would not."

"I did not stay to hear the story," she returned, enjoying the fact of having another at the disadvantage under which it was generally her own fate to labor; "I stayed to be polite."

"Oh, ah! That was all right, of course; but Uncle Wynne would never have noticed whether we were there or not. He is a trump of the first magnitude in everything which really amounts to anything; but his stories are not generally what you might call enjoyable. I cannot keep up my share of the hilarity. I become stolid at the last, no matter how frisky I have been at the start."

"You should follow Mr. Lanman's example; he is always ready to laugh, and he ought to be harder to please than you, at your age."

"Here, I say," he cried, "do not remind me of my infirmity; and as for Uncle Lan's perfections, I may admire, but I can never hope to equal them."

"You might try. You never can tell how good you can be until you try."

"A delicate compliment! Still, I do not know that I sigh to be recognized as among those who are commonly called 'good.' There are so many kinds of good. That which I have been brought up to con-

sider the best hardly knows of the existence of anything different from itself. That seems to me stupidity. People must have some knowledge of the way the world is made up to be of any use in it."

"And how would you have them learn?"

"If they are at all bright, they are bound to learn; if they are at all gentlemen, they are bound to prefer the best. Such people know how to be liberal. I hate the kind who are contented to shut their eyes and build a fence of excellence about them. *They* are good, they think; *they* are safe: other people must take their chances."

She shook her head. "There is something the matter with your theory," she said. "I do not know what it is, but it is wrong."

"If you think so, it is because I have not been able to explain myself. I am sure that you agree with me."

"Perish the thought!" she cried, laughing.

"Certainly you do. Do you see anything out of the way in Uncle Lan? He is exactly the kind of man that I admire. You were recommending me to follow his example a few minutes ago, I believe."

"And I recommend you still. I am sure that he is as good and kind as a man can be. He has certainly been very kind to me," she added, with a little pang of remorse.

"There you are!" cried Clifford, triumphantly; "no one ever speaks of him except in that way. The proof of the uncle is in the reputation."

Sophy had hardly considered Lanman of late. Since their long talk together, he had accompanied her but seldom in her little excursions, never except

when Clifford was also present. There was not the least apparent change in his manner toward her, but there had been no further advance, and she had quietly forgotten him in his nephew's livelier society. Now so enthusiastically reminded of him, she became quite serious. How selfish she had been toward him, to be sure! She would be kinder in future, that she was resolved. What must he not think of her already!

"I wish your brother would not always be talking of going home," Clifford was saying, in a complaining tone. "What is he in such a tremendous hurry about? We are just beginning to enjoy ourselves."

"Yes," she agreed, with irony, "it is strange that he should ever care to stir, even in the cause of business, as long as you and I are having a good time. But, seriously, we shall have to go soon; I did not dream of being away so long."

"By the way," he asked, suddenly, "when you go home, what are you going to do?"

"Do?" she echoed. "Thousands of things. I shall sketch—and sketch—and sketch;" with a longer pause between every repetition, which was offered each time as something new.

"And sketch—and sketch," he went on, assisting her. "What a busy life! Do not you want to know what I shall do after you are gone? I shall cry—and cry—and cry."

"Do not fatigue yourself," she said, laughingly. "I shall have a reason for always doing the same thing; I am to be an artist."

It was the first time that the determination had ever been announced by her so flatly, and yet it was

the first time that its very mention had been received with anything but disapproval. The contrast was refreshing. "I am not an artist yet, you understand," she added; "I only mean to be one. I am to study with Mr. Erskine in the fall."

"Where, — at his studio?"

"Yes, there, probably."

"Now I know where I shall spend the winter. Uncle Lan has been trying all summer to find out where I should like to go; but I could not tell him, because I did not know."

"Have you made up your mind to spend the winter in Mr. Erskine's studio?" she asked, laughing.

"The Lord forbid!" he exclaimed, devoutly; "and yet you might have made a worse guess. I shall be there or thereabout. You do not know Erskine, I fancy. He is a terrible old screw. You will want some one to revive your drooping spirits when he is in his tantrums. I shall be there. It has been suggested before that I should stay in the city this winter and go into society. I was lukewarm upon the subject; now my temperature has risen."

On and on they wandered together, dodging the great bumping beetles and bats, whose rapid flights occasionally crossed their path, and making reckless excursions into the long, dewy grass in search of fallen fruit, which they tasted indiscriminately, with a hardihood which only complete ignorance of the dangers of damp feet and the first principles of digestion could have ventured.

"One of Uncle Wynne's best stories is about these pear-trees," Clifford said, poking about in the grass, and filling his pockets with half-ripe fruit. "He

wanted to have shade-trees here, as a kind of approach to the house ; and when the gardener planted these, Uncle Wynne remonstrated, and told him that he would never get any pears from them ; that he had much better have planted maples. But the gardener said he 'd bet he would get as many pears from these as he would from maples. I call that a very good story, do not you ? ”

It was quite dark when they reached the house. As they approached it, their accustomed eyes descried Lanman's solitary figure pacing slowly back and forth along the wide veranda. Clifford instantly saluted the apparition with a key-bugle effect, executed by an ingenious application of mouth to fingers. He was about to repeat the effort when his uncle, advancing to the top of the steps, checked him unceremoniously.

“ Mr. Verrick is trying to get some sleep,” he said. “ In Heaven's name, stop that riot.”

“ Why, it is only nine o'clock ! ” Sophy exclaimed, in surprise. “ Will he go to sleep without speaking to me ? I must go to him at once.”

He made no motion to allow her to pass him. “ Not to-night,” he said, gently ; “ it was his wish. He is very tired.” Then turning from her with something of an effort, “ I am sorry to interrupt your fine performance, Cliff,” he said, laughing mirthlessly, “ but duty before pleasure, you know. Mr. Wynne has also gone to his room. He might not like to be disturbed.”

“ Mr. Wynne ! ” cried Clifford, surprised in his turn. “ Why, the evening is just begun, and he is such an owl ! No one was either tired or sleepy when we left. Do you languish so entirely when we

are not with you? How flattering! We will never again stir from beside you."

Sophy laughed, and snapped away a cherry-stone. "I shall not go anywhere after this," she said, "even in the middle of the day, without imagining you all instantly fallen asleep."

Clifford giggled immoderately. Again his uncle hushed him.

"What is the matter with you, Uncle Lan?" he said, with some impatience. "Cannot I even laugh? I was not making a noise; and if I had been, it is the first time in my life that I have not been welcome to make all the noise I chose. I believe that something has happened."

Instantly his uncle's hand was upon his arm. Apparently it rested there only for the purpose of administering a playful gentle shake; but under the seeming lightness Clifford felt the fingers close in a firm, restraining grasp. Alarmed at this evident warning, he became as quiet as he had before been noisy.

Sophy, having received no warning, chattered busily on.

"Your nephew and I have been discussing the most weighty subjects this evening," she said; "that accounts for our being very wide awake. Should you not like to know what we have been talking about? If you would, ask him. He will lose his vivacity, and also sleep, if he does not have an opportunity to speak soon."

"I am not asleep," said Clifford, quietly; "we talked about true goodness and Miss Verrick's future, — inseparable subjects, as you see."

"He does not know anything about the first," she

said, laughing, "and I do not know anything about the last. I wish I did. Have you any idea what Mr. Erskine intends that I should do?"

"I have not had an opportunity of speaking to him about that," Lanman answered; "I am sorry. I do not wonder that you are interested."

"Everything connected with it is so uncertain," she said, musingly. "I do not even know whether I shall be permitted to leave home. I have not mentioned it to my father; it takes so much courage and preparation. Cannot you advise me, Mr. Lanman, as to the best way of bringing the subject before him? I have thought and thought; but nothing seems exactly what I should like to say."

Lanman was silent for a minute.

"Wait a week until he composes it," said Clifford, "and you will have an oration calculated to convince any hearer, with an antidote for every doubt and a stimulant for every concession."

But when Lanman spoke, he offered no suggestion of immediate value. "Why need you try to take thought for the future?" he said, very soberly. "No matter how we may plan and contrive, it is almost sure to go for nought."

Sophy laughed. "Ah! your invention is unequal to the strain, is it not?" she said. "I am able to think better now of my own powers. Confess that you could not help me at all."

"I cannot help you at all," he answered, obediently. Then, seeing her look of surprise at his serious bearing, he brightened, and struck at once into a different subject, even rivalling Sophy herself in his vivacity.

But in the morning she knew all. The faces about

her expressed open pity then. There was Mr. Wynne, without remonstrance superintending arrangements for their departure ; Lanman, self-possessed and busy ; Clifford, with shy sympathy cudgelling his quick brain in the effort to bethink himself of some unrendered service which it might be his fortune to perform. And there was Walter, with pale, composed face, pondering and unoccupied, waiting for the expected carriage which was to carry him, whether in fit condition or not, to the station. And there, in Sophy's hand, was the telegram which had caused these sad changes. She read and re-read it, each time with a kind of stupid incredulity which yet insensibly carried conviction with its cruel, unsoftened brevity.

"Your father died suddenly yesterday. If possible, return at once."

It was signed by Mrs. Hurlingham.

CHAPTER XI.

THE autumn had come. Down in the garden the chrysanthemums and salvias now reigned alone, compensating for the death of their more delicate fellows by the cheerful persistency of their flaming color. Here and there tinges of russets and yellows, of maroons and vermilions, showed themselves among the trees, still standing whole-robed and splendid in the lingering summer weather.

Within the Verrick house there were as many changes as without its walls. Walter had long since returned to his labors in the city. Rob was back at school. Mrs. Hurlingham and her two nieces at present comprised the family.

The first great shock of loneliness was over. Grief had given place once more to incredulity, its second childhood. The father who was gone, had rarely been with his children for long at a time. How easy it was to imagine him still in his study! The memory of that day when they had, with tearful eyes and nerves shaken to agony, seen him hidden from their sight under the heavy earth, was not half so powerful in bringing to their hearts the reality of his having passed forever from among them as was the sight of that desolate, unused room in its unaccustomed cleanliness and order, with the gaping, utterly strange vacancies left by the more valuable

among the books and apparatus which had been divided among the chief associates of their late owner.

Sophy had taken no part in that terrible putting to rights. It seemed to her that she must scream aloud at the sight of those pathetic treasures, by him so long, so faithfully cherished, now standing in unvalued confusion along the halls and entry, while the vigorous scratch of the desecrating broom was heard behind the closed door.

Mrs. Hurlingham proved a host in herself in this emergency. She felt kindly toward the memory of her brother-in-law, but she was of too thoroughly practical an order to experience that softening forgetfulness, common to more impressionable minds, which mellows and blends the peculiarities of a departed friend to an ideal perfection of character. There had been a difference between her alert, bustling manner of living, and his silent, patient striving for seemingly worthless ends, which would have precluded the possibility of sympathetic association had they been the sole surviving man and woman on the globe. This fact she had always thoroughly appreciated, and her judgment was by no means blinded by sentiment because he had gone, never to return. Aunt Sophronia was not young. She had seen people die before. Her parents, her brothers and sisters, all were in their graves, and she had stood beside their death-beds, had witnessed their funerals, the division of their property; and life had moved by and left them far behind.

It is only the first blow—the first, and perhaps the second—which strikes our hearts in sharpest cruelty. After that, we have learned our lesson; and

whoever then may leave us, we recognize the loss as only in the order of life's experience. Living even at its best is a toughening, hardening process for a tender, sensitive organ like the heart.

So Mrs. Hurlingham's reflections upon the loss of her relative were quite serene. John had never been useful, she thought, and his children would be quite as well off without as with him. Sophy, her especial care, would certainly be benefited.

During her enforced week of tête-à-tête visit with Jessie, Aunt Sophronia had learned that there would be objections to her again resuming charge of her namesake; and had Mr. Verrick's veto been then obtained by the opposition, it would have been an obstacle which she could not have surmounted. As it was, she had not only Sophy's promise to accompany her on her return to the city, but had even wrested a reluctant assent from Walter to the plan. Since his father's death Walter had spent every alternate Sunday with his sisters, and many and sharp had been the arguments and discussions which took place upon these occasions of his home-coming. Aunt Sophronia was by far the most skilful tactician, and completely distanced the girls in the expression and successful urging of her views. Walter could only remonstrate. He would have protested stoutly, had not Sophy's wishes and tearful entreaties so moved his judgment.

"As for her studying art," Aunt Sophronia said to him, confidentially, "that whim will die a natural death, of course. But you must let her try it to her satisfaction. Then when she is cured, she is cured once and for all, and we shall hear no more about it. She will soon have enough of it to last her for

the rest of her days. I can provide pleasanter occupation for her than that, I know. She has always disliked steady application of any kind. I am sorry that her mourning will prevent her entering into gayeties! However, that will come later."

When Sophy unfolded her plans to her aunt that lady found them different in many respects from those which she herself had formed. She discovered that her niece had resolved to take a studio of her own, where it was her intention to spend all the hours of daylight in every day of the week except Sunday; that although she accepted with pleasure her aunt's offer of a home, she thought it only fair to say that she should rarely be disengaged and able to avail herself of its advantages.

Mrs. Hurlingham was a trifle staggered by this high-handed manner of procedure. But the belief was strong within her that the unlovely theory of constant, unremitting toil might be undermined by quietly offered attractions in the way of amusement. In the past, Sophy had always ended by submitting to her influence. Surely it would be so still. It was true that such tentative experiments as she ventured toward the mastery of her niece might have been considered among her failures the most conspicuous, but she had argued that away from home-influences altogether the conquest would be easier to effect. To conquer, to rule, was her delight. Her husband she had long ago subjugated; there was neither profit nor pleasure in so easy a victory. Such difficulties as Sophy's future might present would only render conflict more interesting, victory more glorious.

There was conflict already in the air. With an

eye to the possibility of early festivities, Mrs. Hurlingham offered a pious remonstrance against the depth of Sophy's weeds.

"I wear mourning, Aunt Sophronia," Sophy replied, "because I have reason to be mournful, not because I doubt that he is happy and at rest. You have always worn it yourself. Why do you object to it in me?"

"In moderation I do not object," was the answer; "but there is such a thing as overdoing it. No ornament whatever, not even a ring! — it is dismal for a young person like you."

"If there is anything in the world that I dislike," Sophy returned, with decision, "it is cheerful mourning. I would rather wear sky-blue and be frank about it."

"One may be frank enough to be silly, and not frank enough to be honest," was the emphatic retort. "People should be as judicious in the use of frankness as in anything else."

So the subject was dropped, — temporarily dropped, Aunt Sophronia told herself, — and the date of their intended departure was fixed. Sophy despatched a note to Mr. Erskine, making known to him that fact, and asking an early appointment.

In due course she received from him a scribbled card, couched in the very plainest and baldest of terms, appointing for their preliminary interview the afternoon of the day of her arrival. Such promptness was surprising, perhaps, but it was delightful. He should find no sign of apathy in her, but a diligence and thirst for knowledge which should equal his ability to impart it.

It had been determined that Jessie, together with

Augustine, should keep the house, that there still might be a home for them all. Jessie had raised many objections to her sister's new plan; but upon Walter's capitulation she ceased to give utterance to her sentiments, and accepted with pleasure the suggestion that she should have down a relative or two at a time through the winter, to bear her company in her sister's absence. Jessie feared solitude for herself not at all; it was liberty for Sophy which she dreaded.

Indeed, a kind of solitude had already settled upon the house. Although the Verricks had imagined themselves a quiet family, with comparatively few who were interested in their affairs, they had, in the days immediately following their father's death, found themselves the recipients of notes and letters of condolence representing treble the number of those whom they would have reckoned as their friends, with even a set or two of resolutions from scientific bodies of which he had been in life a light. They had been called upon and sympathized with until the repetition of their melancholy story became almost painless to them. Then there were so many business arrangements to be attended to, so many strange new experiences to undergo, that their lives had been quite full of the dreary activity of it all.

But now this time had passed, friends and neighbors had returned to their own life pursuits, and the exhaustive house-ransacking was over. Taking warning by the ruthless investigation of her father's effects, Sophy, when this duty was finished, devoted herself to the business of looking over her own worldly belongings, burning, destroying, packing away. There should be little of hers for others to

care for when she should be dead. All her past letters and sketch-books, be it wise or unwise, they should feed the flame. The notion of death haunted her. The shadow of the great change was always with her, not only when she was alone, but in connection with all her surroundings.

Among the later callers who came to offer their sympathy to the Verricks appeared one evening Mr. Wynne and Clifford Lanman. Sophy had no scruples about devoting herself to her late playfellow, leaving the older gentleman, with his courtesy and his garrulity, to her sister's care. Jessie never talked when any one relieved her of the necessity; Mr. Wynne might be said never to listen under a like condition. Wherefore they were at once employed, and without need of further attention. Mrs. Hurlingham was not present.

Clifford seemed at first a little awed by the sombre change in his friend's costume, and the quiet, serious little smiles, so new in his knowledge of her, with which she talked with him of their past jollities. But he could not but recognize the fact that she was glad to see him; and in return he soon lost his sensation of strangeness, and assumed little by little a tempered edition of his own bright manner.

"If you knew what it was with us the day you left," he said, seriously. "It was desperate! As for Uncle Lan, he disappeared at once, and has not been down since. Uncle Wynne and I are going up to town now for the winter. You see I shall be present, as I said I should, at the scene of your triumphs. There is no one down at the place excepting Mrs. Coombs and the servants and the dogs. You remember Louis Philippe and Whiskey Poker?"

"Yes, indeed! I liked the setters best of all. How are they?"

"Phil has had a thorn in his foot, but Whisk is well, and sent his love and duty. Mrs. Coombs says that she likes Phil best because he is so 'dough-syle.' Do you remember the night that we arrived?"

Little lights of pleased memories were dancing in his eyes, and it was with some tardiness that he checked the impulse to laugh aloud.

"I beg your pardon," he apologized, in dismay; "I had no intention of laughing."

"Why should you not laugh?" she returned, heartily. "I should not be so glad to see you if you were not like yourself. I mean to have no end of laughs with you this winter, if I am fortunate."

"I shall not have a thing to distract my attention from all the fun going about. I mean to devote myself to it. But if you sigh," he added, noticing the deep-drawn breath with which she greeted his words, "what shall I do then?"

"You must sigh with me, — you must dance when I pipe, and weep when I lament."

"Good," he said, with determination; "I have my orders;" but he looked anything but a weeping character as he said it.

"I shall have a great deal of work to do," she went on, "and of course I cannot be disturbed then. I hardly know yet how I am to dispose of myself, as I have only a line from Mr. Erskine, who is to direct me; but I know that I am to work, and to work all the time."

"What do you mean by 'all the time'?" he asked, quickly.

"I mean what I say," she answered, laughing.

"What! every day?"

"Certainly; every day, and all day long."

His entire dismay was amusing. "I do not believe it," he said, positively; "at least — I beg your pardon; but you cannot be sure of it, and I will not allow myself to be so. There is a beautiful uncertainty about the future. Do you mean to paint in Erskine's studio, or to have one of your own?"

"I do not know positively; there is a beautiful uncertainty about that too. I should prefer having one of my own."

"I should think so. And of course if you do, I shall drop in every day."

"No, you must not; I shall 'sport my oak.' Honestly, there is no joke about it; I must work all the time."

"Do you think that you will like it?" he asked, dubiously. "You might work half the time, and we could enjoy ourselves the other half. That's the idea!" he hurried on, not giving her a chance to speak. "We can join the riding-school, and take road-lessons. They have plenty of good horses, and you can always have the same one if you like. Then we can go to concerts and the opera, — not in dress, of course, but up where you can go as you please; and we can skate after the ice comes. Oh, there won't be any trouble in finding things to do!"

If Aunt Sophronia could only have known what an aid she possessed in this glib young tempter, she would have lost no time in forming an alliance with him; and against such an alliance Sophy might have found it hard to struggle. But Aunt Sophronia had gone for the night to the house of some of those

distant stranger-kindred who start up like phantoms at the presence of any unusual circumstance in a family, and disappear when ordinary routine has resumed its sway, to be heard of no more until the next convulsion shall bring them again to the surface.

Sophy had often spoken to Clifford of her aunt; but now she bestowed on him additional information, since they might be expected soon to meet. She also gave him Mrs. Hurlingham's address as her own destination.

"I shall be afraid of her," he said, "I know I shall. Does she love little boys?"

"To distraction!" was the laughing answer. "I never knew her to speak to one, except my brother Rob; but I am sure that the unawakened sentiment is within her."

"Ah! you fail to encourage me, somehow."

"You will be fortunate if she does not fail to encourage you also."

"But if I dissemble, and appear agreeable, would that do any good, do you think?"

Sophy was inclined to assure him of his ability to soften the heart of any living creature, he looked so handsome, so bright, so utterly irresistible, as he sat beside her in the lamp-light. But she withheld the remark, with the discretion of a judicious elder. It would not do to make him vain and spoil him.

Before he went she told him the story of her father's death as she had heard it and repeated it before so many times: how the stroke had been so sudden that his associate, with whom he was in conversation, had not had time even to reach his side before all was over; and how those who knew him best

remembered then that he had been aware years before of an affection of the heart, which, nevertheless, had troubled him so little that he had ceased to think of it or to spare himself even the severest or most protracted labor when occasion demanded. And so neglect had cost him his life.

Clifford was unable adequately to express himself. "I have never known how to show you how sorry I was," he said, haltingly; "I never know what to do. Sometimes I think that I am not fit to associate with any but miners and sailors and rough people who do not expect to have quiet, discreet friends. I never in my life could do anything worth doing."

Surely vanity had not harmed him yet. She hardly knew him, with that downcast, deprecatory air; but the cropped waves of the yellow head were his own. She laid her fingers lightly upon them, and then with a sudden touch roughened the little curls until they stood well upon end.

"That is your punishment," she said, with as much of her old manner as she could command, "for paying me the poor compliment of thinking me so stupid. I know how hard it is to be sorry expressively. Do you remember the man who could think of nothing to say when he was called upon for sympathy but 'never mind'? I should be like him."

As they arose to go, Mr. Wynne addressed her. "I learn with pleasure that I may expect to see you soon in the city," he said; "although you have such a charming home"—with a gallant bow to Jessie—"that I do not understand how you can make up your mind to leave it. We take our departure to-morrow—and you?"

"In a few days, probably."

“I never saw Frostmore looking as beautiful as it does now, and they have a charming young lady staying there at present. You may imagine — ha-ha — how grieved Clifford is at being obliged to leave so soon. Ha-ha-ha!”

“We are both desolated,” Clifford acquiesced, seriously.

“Yes, yes! All the gentlemen are her slaves, and the ladies too. I do not know which is the more captivated by her, Mr. or Mrs. Frost — ha-ha!”

As they were passing from the room, Clifford spoke his mind in an aside to Sophy. “Uncle Wynne pretends to believe that all ladies are adored by all gentlemen,” he said. “That is his way of being polite.”

CHAPTER XII.

THE woods were flaming finer and finer in the beauty of their dying splendor, and Sophy's portfolio waxed fat with her repeated efforts to portray their brilliant coloring. The few days of home liberty still remaining to her were passing monotonously by; for Jessie was as methodical now as ever in her habits, and her occupations were such as interested her sister but little, her mornings being given to domestic duties and music, her afternoons to needlework.

Sophy had also been obliged to devote herself in some degree to the detested needle; but she had worked while Jessie had been obliged to be otherwise busy; and as she declined to have more than two extremely plain gowns, she had long since, with her aunt's assistance, completed her wardrobe. She offered to help Jessie, as she and Mrs. Hurlingham sat together fashioning her more complex garments; but Jessie was particular, and Sophy did not sew especially well, so her offer was declined with thanks. There was nothing to keep her from her paint-box, and she set forth in solitude day after day, with no word of remonstrance or encouragement from any one. She was ashamed of herself for being lonely. "What do I want?" she asked herself,

trudging homeward across the fields. "If they interfere with me, I do not like that; and if they let me do as I please, that makes me uncomfortable too. I never used to be so hard to please; I must be growing old."

But this was no very consoling reflection, nor did it help satisfactorily to solve the problem of her discontent.

On the afternoon of the day before her departure she walked alone, with no particular object. Her sketching materials were all stowed, below the point of resurrection, in her trunk. Aunt Sophronia had attended to the packing. She could pack wisely and well; it would have driven her to distraction to be obliged to allow any one to attend to that department of travel for her.

So that duty was also taken off Sophy's hands, and executed in a manner which was quite miraculous. Could she have entertained the slightest hope of being able to return the compact layers to their present reduced space, she would have liked to remove them and find her sketch-book. But when she spoke of it, the idea was received with such dismay that she at once gave it up, and walked away with a sense of injury which was a luxury, having for once a real foundation.

As she passed the Frostmore entrance on her way, she was pleased to find her waist clasped by a pair of short, up-reaching arms, while the fair little face of their owner, Roger Frost, held itself impatiently upon tiptoe to be kissed; and along the prospective of the drive Lolly's figure was seen advancing, with fat white trotting legs, to join his brother in the interview.

"I have wanted so much to come and see you, Miss Verrick," said Roger, standing as nearly as possible in front of the panting Lolly, that he might receive undivided attention. "I have cried and run away; but mamma said that I must not, because you were busy, and would not be glad to see me. I wanted to ask you why you would not be glad; I am a very good boy — sometimes."

This last statement was made a little doubtfully. Then the small face was puckered into a frown which arrested the friendly assurances which had risen to Sophy's lips, and a serious-looking young woman, with gold-rimmed spectacles and clothing according to the charmless decrees of common-sense, appeared from within the grounds.

"Master Roger!" she cried, "Master Lawrence! Naughty little boys! You were told not to step outside the gate."

Roger hid himself as well as he was able in the folds of Sophy's skirt. "Run, Lolly, run!" he said, with a hasty chuckle; "I'll hide."

But owing to the fact that both the boys were in plain sight when their unwelcome overseer emerged upon them, their giggling hopes that she would believe them far away proved abortive.

Sophy smiled upon the careworn Minna, who had managed to seize Lolly's arm, and now hovered over Roger, hardly liking to detach him forcibly from his living refuge.

"Has she caught Lolly?" murmured he, in smothered tones. "Don't let her see me."

Sophy laughed. "She has seen you," she said, stooping over him. "Stand up, like a good little boy, and I will ask her to let you come and walk

with me now. Should you like that, — you and Lolly?"

Roger surrendered his hold. "And can I paint? Do let me paint. That has been the reason all the time why I wanted to come and see you so much."

"May he?" she asked, addressing Minna.

Minna's face was set. "I am afraid I could n't allow it," she said, positively. "Master Roger was a very naughty boy this morning. He must have extra lessons this afternoon."

Roger instantly set up a lusty roar, in which Lawrence, after a moment's sympathetic quivering of the lips, as lustily joined.

"I won't have more lessons," howled Roger, dancing with rage; "I will go to walk. Woo-hoo-hoo!"

"Ur-hur-hur!" chimed in Lolly. "We will go to walk."

Sophy pitied them with all her heart. How people did tyrannize over children! She realized, almost as thoroughly as they appeared to do, the hardship that it would be to spend that magnificent afternoon over a task.

As the duet was at its height, Minna stepped back with a satisfied air and a few remarks which could be seen rather than heard. It was not until the two blindly puckered faces had screamed for yet another minute that, opening each half an eye to discover whence came the postponement of the expected hand-to-hand encounter, they beheld their father's composed figure standing over them with folded arms and saddened majesty of countenance. Immediately the tempest was stilled.

"Are these my two little gentlemen?" he said, quietly musing.

Roger slunk forward to make his peace. "Papa, dear," he cried, embracing his father's knee and winking away the undisfiguring drops upon his lashes, "I am sorry, but I want to go to walk. I want to awfully much, and I must be punished, Minna says. I always have to be punished. I never can get punished up even, and ready to have a nice time."

Lolly possessed himself of his father's hand, and looked speechlessly up into his face, touchingly confident that affairs would now be settled to Roger's, and hence to his own, satisfaction.

"Have you invited Miss Verrick to come in with you and see mamma?"

"No, Papa, we did not want her to come in with us, we wanted to go and walk with her; but if I must read a lesson — Oh, Miss Verrick, please do come in! I will get my book and read to you. No, Minna, I shall not walk with you; Lolly can walk with you."

A second skirmish was avoided by Mr. Frost's timely suggestion that they should both run on toward the house and apprise their mother of the fact that Miss Verrick was to arrive. So harmony was restored, and they started gayly away upon their mission.

"I hope you will receive an apology for the boys," Mr. Frost said to Sophy. "They will be gentlemen eventually, I believe; but they have grown away from their nursery governess. They need another teacher now, — some one with sufficient tact and knowledge of boys to keep their lives from being entirely a round of retribution. Minna means to do

her best; but their small transgressions appear so great in her eyes that she fears to allow them the smallest latitude."

"Poor little fellows!" said Sophy, compassionately. "Why do you not find them some one now, very soon? It must be dreadful to be held so fast; I do not wonder that they rebel."

"We shall try to alter the arrangement by next year," he answered. "We must be sure of the right person. Mr. Lanman speaks very highly of Clifford's tutor."

"I should think that he would be the very man."

"You liked Clifford, then? I was sure that you would; he is such a bright, jolly boy. He has had training of the right kind, and not too much of it."

They found Mrs. Frost and Miss Griswold seated upon lawn-chairs awaiting their approach. But the small messengers were nowhere to be seen; Minna also had disappeared.

"Where are the boys?" Mr. Frost inquired, when a pause occurred in the conversation.

"They have gone in with Minna. They are in disgrace this afternoon, and are obliged to have another lesson."

"They promised to read with me," interposed Sophy, smiling. "I hope that they are coming back."

"I am afraid that I must ask you to excuse them. As the lesson is a punishment, its effect would be lost if they were allowed to make a pleasure of it. It is very kind in you to inquire for them."

Mr. Frost arose. "I think that I will go and see fair play," he said. "In such a cause, Miss Verrick,

I will ask you to excuse me for a time, — a very short time, I trust."

"Oh, Lawrence, you are such a subverter of discipline!" said his wife, reproachfully.

"How can I help it," he returned, laughing, "when there is so much discipline which needs subversion? However, if you have serious objections, I will not go."

"Please yourself certainly, only do not let them think that they are in favor. They have been following the line of artistic decoration, Miss Verrick. They took some red paint from Mr. Erskine's box, it seems, when he was here, but did not use it until to-day, because they could not agree as to what to do with it. But this morning they seemed to receive inspiration, and painted one whole side of the General. Sometimes I think that all boys ought to be brought up in lunatic asylums."

Sophy would fain have laughed heartily; but as Miss Griswold appeared to consider the enormity as anything but a joke, she forebore as well as she was able.

"He will never be fit to touch again," complained the afflicted one. "Manson and James have been working over him the whole morning, but he is not nearly the right color yet."

Sophy hastily withdrew her mental vision from the contemplation of the General's unaccustomed glory, and after a brief expression of pity spoke of Mr. Erskine and his work.

Apparently this was not to lead her as far from the tantalizing subject as she had hoped.

"Mr. Erskine is to paint my portrait this winter," said Miss Griswold. "He was to have painted

me with the General; but now I shall not think of it, of course. It would have made a beautiful picture."

Sophy could not doubt this ingenuous statement; although looking upon the picture which the fair model presented at that moment in her pretty attitude of distress, with her yellow hair curled and knotted high, her white throat and arms only half covered by delicate lace, and the *suede* slipper with its frivolous little heel, it was difficult to believe that any other pose or costume could be more picturesque.

"You leave for town soon, do you not?" said Mrs. Frost, addressing Sophy.

"I leave to-morrow; I am to study with Mr. Erskine."

Miss Griswold's sorrowful countenance become politely cheerful. "I shall see you there," she said; "I expect to be at his studio quite often until my portrait is finished. My sister, Mrs. Garland, has taken a town house, and she writes me that she will be ready for me within a week or two."

"But you will not be ready for her," Mrs. Frost asserted, hospitably. "We are to have a houseful of people after this week, Miss Verrick. What a pity that you are to be away."

"I am afraid I shall be obliged to give up everything of a social nature. I have so much to learn that I must be busy."

"Oh! you are to be regularly an artist?" said Miss Griswold, with rising enthusiasm. "That will be delightful. I do not think that there is anything which I would rather be than an artist, if it did not take so much time."

"It takes all the time there is," returned Sophy, smiling. "I never expect to have an hour more of daylight to myself."

"That will be a great trial of your strength, will it not?" suggested Mrs. Frost. "You must not let us find your young looks entirely gone when you come back to us."

"I shall not come back, I am afraid; I expect to be busy always. My object in working is to excel all others, if it is in me. To do that, one must never be idle."

"But you cannot endure such a life, dear child."

Sophy frowned a little. "Oh, do not say that!" she cried, earnestly. "I know that I can do much better than you think. Only wait and see."

Miss Griswold sighed. "After all, life is too short," she said, willing to change a subject which was becoming so serious. "If I want anything painted, I shall get some one to do it for me."

Before Sophy's unceremonious call was ended, Mr. Frost returned to join the circle, and the boys came dancing at his side, in overflowing joy at their emancipation.

"Miss Verrick is to paint my portrait, Lawrence," said his wife, making a place for him beside her; "I am to be her first sitter. And this time I think we may be sure of something which will please us."

"And will you paint me, please, Miss Verrick?" ventured little Lolly, for once forestalling his brother.

"No, me, Miss Verrick," said Roger, promptly; "Lolly will look better to paint when he is bigger."

"You might execute a family group," suggested Mr. Frost, laughing. "I also seem to feel that jus-

tice has not yet been done me on canvas. How does the idea strike the artist?"

"With as many sheep as I can put in for nothing, *à la* vicar of Wakefield," said Sophy. "I shall be delighted with the commission. I only hope that time will forget us until I am ready."

As Sophy was bidding her friends farewell, she could not but know them to be friends indeed. Even Roger's interested regrets were pleasant.

"If you asked me to come and see you in the city," he added, "perhaps I might come, — if you told mamma that you would be very much pleased, you know."

"Indeed, I should be very much pleased," she returned, quite earnestly; "I do not want to lose my little friends."

When she had taken her leave the boys escorted her as far as the gate, where she kissed them and bade them adieu. Rather to her regret, Mr. Frost accompanied her to her own door.

Aunt Sophronia's peculiar wit was at its highest flow that evening. With baleful flashes it illuminated the sitting-room, the tea-table, the drive. Any attempt at ordinary conversation was slain at a blow.

"It has been an exceptionally fine day," ventured Jessie, after a long pause, feeling quite safe in that time-honored remark.

"All weather is exceptional," retorted her aunt; "average weather would be rare;" and the subject was disposed of.

Sophy, nothing daunted, chatted at her leisure about her afternoon's adventure, dwelling upon the friendliness of the boys toward her, the wisdom of their father, and Miss Griswold's beauty.

"If you could have seen her this afternoon," she said, referring to this last-named. "There is no use in trying to describe her, but everything that she has or does is so effective. You should hear her play on the banjo and sing!"

"If you are talking to me, I would rather hear her keep quiet," returned Aunt Sophronia, shortly.

Sophy laughed a little. "Well, if you won't admire her, think of Mr. Frost," she said, a little mischievously, disregarding her sister's warning frown. "He always does and says exactly the right thing at the right time, and he impresses me as being such a well-educated, well-informed man. I don't think he can have wasted quite all his college days, Aunt Sophronia."

"Even if he had, he might know enough to answer whatever you know enough to ask," was the trenchant answer.

But here, before Sophy could retort, Jessie cut in pacifically with a harmless reflection as to her own changed condition after the morrow. "Cousin Martha will not get here until four o'clock," she said, "and you go so early; I shall be quite a Selkirk."

"Oh, I hope you will not be lonely!" said Sophy, contritely.

"No, indeed; I shall be too busy. I wonder how we can impress on Augustine that she must get up at six. You never can wake her if she is asleep."

"You certainly cannot if she is awake," said Mrs. Hurlingham, declining to be left longer out of the conversation.

Late in the evening she undertook to question her younger niece.

"Are there any other visitors at Frostmore now

besides this Miss —, whatever her name is, — this young woman you were speaking of?”

“Do you mean is Mr. Lanman there?” Sophy returned, with a directness which was quite disarming.

“I mean what I said, and nothing more.”

“Ah! Well, then, I cannot answer you; I do not know.”

Sophy’s evident mirth over her reply provoked her aunt. “Since you have mentioned Mr. — Mr. Lanman, I may as well tell you now that I do not expect to see him at my house. As long as you are under my roof it is my duty at any rate to control your associates, and I do not approve of any of those whom you have at present — not any of them.”

Sophy looked for a moment sternly astonished, and then laughed indifferently.

“You have the true Puritan spirit of battle, Aunt Sophronia,” she said; “you thank God for the chance, and then wade in. However, it does n’t make any difference; I shall not have leisure for any friends at first, and by the time I have, you may be very glad to see them. We can never foretell the future.”

“And there is no use in foretelling the past,” answered Aunt Sophronia, hurrying to her room with the last word triumphantly in her possession.

CHAPTER XIII.

FOR two weeks the small bare studio adjoining that occupied by Hayward Erskine had been let to his pupil, Miss Sophronia Verrick; for two weeks that pupil had toiled unremittingly, displaying unflagging zeal in the pursuit which she had chosen. Morning and afternoon was she at her post at the art school, or in her new quarters, working from casts or living models with dusty charcoal or grimy smut, never pausing for an hour's recreation. She labored on, receiving little or no encouragement from any one; for Mrs. Hurlingham ignored the entire subject of her niece's employment, and as for Mr. Erskine, beyond directing her studies and sharply criticising her errors, he paid her no attention whatever.

The breakfast hour for the Hurlingham household was nine o'clock, despite the fact that two of the three persons who composed the family breakfasted a full hour earlier. Mr. Hurlingham was a lover of equestrian exercise; and it was his practice to forego the effort at morning sleep, which he was too nervous to enjoy, that he might have leisure to indulge himself in his favorite pastime before he need begin the business of the day. Until Sophy came, he had taken his morning meal alone; but now she elected to join him rather than wait until the appearance of the more slumberous head of the house.

Mr. Hurlingham was a busy mau, inclined to

abstraction during conversation with any one but his wife, who allowed him no liberty upon the point. He had come into the family when the Verrick nieces and nephews were too old to be able to adopt him as an uncle; but he liked his wife's relatives, and they in return found him sufficiently agreeable. He had pursued a successful business career, wherein he still worked perseveringly, was a trifle "near" as regarded his accumulations, and had the reputation of being absolutely uncheatable in the matter of horse-flesh. What there might be in common between him and his wife, Sophy had as yet failed to discover. They met at a late dinner, where she discussed the ways of the world and the people therein with an unblinking hardihood which scorned the notion that a spade by any other name might sound as sonorous; after which, if there were no engagements for the evening, they entertained themselves separately, he in reading the evening papers and falling into brief, jerky napping, and she in games of patience or the composition of an afghan, wherein seemed to be projected an infinity of stripes, since there was always one in progress.

Walter generally looked in upon his sister during these evenings. Object to her course as he might, he was resolved that, having formally entered upon it, she should be upheld in it by him, her natural protector. But Sophy never allowed the conversation to dwell upon her affairs; for upon this subject they did not seem able entirely to understand each other, and in her first great enthusiasm she did not feel the need of his encouragement.

"You are sure that you are happy?" he would ask her, wistfully.

"I am as sure as I can possibly be. Once life did not seem to me especially well worth living; but now I am quite frightened sometimes for fear that I may die and lose everything."

His only answer was a puzzled sigh.

She had tried faithfully at first to enable him to see the affair as she saw it. "When I am old," she said, "I want to have something in exchange for my lost youth. All young people are interesting; but when they are not young any longer, and have settled down, they are not a bit interesting any more. I do not want it to be so with me."

"Their own friends care about them; if they are worth anything, age does not make any difference."

"But if they are celebrated, all the world cares about them. It is only a question of whether you prefer the interest of a very few, or that of everybody."

"I should prefer the affection of my own few to the interest of all the world besides," he answered her.

But she could enjoy no such tame prospect. She worked with the vision of a comfortable independence before her, the process of its acquirement not rendered in the least distasteful on account of the personal prominence which might ensue through a trumpet-tooting, garland-flinging fame. Whether the riches or the fame allured her more temptingly, she could not always make up her mind. As the mere mention of the money side of the question irritated Walter beyond reason, she never in these days referred to that motive in his presence. Still, there were moments when the thought of perfect financial independence was very sweet.

And now, it being still early morning, Sophy as usual watched Mr. Hurlingham prance masterfully away upon his dashing brown horse, after which she started off at a round pace for the scene of her daily battle-ground. The distance occupied at least twenty minutes in walking, although gotten over at her very best pace.

The streets were only peopled at that time of day by others like herself who had business before them, and none but these and an occasional energetic housemaid were to be seen. No one had time to notice her. In one way that bewitching independence was already her own.

Sophy's studio was at the very top of a building devoted to business purposes, situated in a part of the city where each foot of land represented enough of a fortune to make it necessary to supply space longitudinally, since latitude was so impossibly precious. It took a good deal of resolute stair-climbing, therefore, to enable one to reach the upper stories; for the conservative owner of the building denied his tenants the luxury of an elevator. He found no difficulty in letting the lower offices at figures sufficient to content him, wherefore the upper rooms might remain vacant, or be occupied by those who were willing to forego improvements for the sake of smaller rents than prevailed elsewhere in the neighborhood.

There were but two studio-rooms, these having been rather adapted to than intended for the purpose; although with the combined attractions of north light and low rent there was little necessity for further adaptation. There were no other apartments on the narrow corridor. Opposite the two doors was

only a flat white wall, with a high-cut window in it. Upon the main hall, however, from which the corridor branched, there were several lawyers' offices, — not belonging, it might be supposed, to very pecunious practitioners, — and among them the room of a solitary type-writing woman, with a white cardboard sign upon her door to inform the passing stranger or inquiring patron of her whereabouts.

Sophy always knew by the appearance of that particular sign when she had gone high enough. As her eyes encountered its welcome legend upon the morning in question, they also beheld Erskine's vexed countenance looking down upon her.

"Oh, good-morning!" he said, gruffly; "I thought you were the model." Then he turned his back upon her and strode angrily down the passage.

Sophy produced her latch-key — that badge of freedom — and opened her own door.

"Is he late again?" she said, cheerfully, throwing down her gloves and hanging her hat upon the cloth hand of Erskine's dummy model, which stood in the corner.

"He's always late!" was the savage answer. "I shall fine him for it;" and thrusting his hands as far down into his pockets as they would go, he stamped once more to the stair-rail to receive the expected victim.

"He was here before you were yesterday," Sophy suggested, as he returned. "He waited out there for an hour, and smoked the worst cigars in the world."

As the artist neared her for the third time in his impatient promenade, she again spoke to him. "What am I to do to-day?" she asked.

"Do?" he repeated, interrogatively. "Go on with what you were doing yesterday. You do not consider that you have exhausted the subject, I hope? And when you have finished that position, you may make three other studies from different points."

"I think I shall know those folds by that time," she said, with a wry little face in the direction of the dummy.

"So much the better for you," he answered, shortly, as he resumed his walk.

The morning passed slowly away. Erskine's tardy model, who was to pose as Saint Sebastian, duly arrived, and was admitted to the scene of his daily martyrdom, where he received an audible berating from Erskine for his shortcomings; after which a death-like stillness fell upon the two rooms, not to be interrupted for hours.

Sophy received the gradually revealed peculiarities of her instructor with curious interest, as so many eccentricities of genius. She felt that he gave her sound instruction, albeit with no idea of softening one struggle for her, or rendering even passably entertaining the endeavor to attain one necessary point. If she would not toil diligently for the sake of the knowledge, she was not worth the privilege of becoming its possessor. This he represented to her from time to time in different degrees of light and shade as occasion suggested; but he never once expressed pleasure at her perseverance, nor satisfaction at her progress.

As the hour of noon drew near there came presently a light, confident knock at the door of Sophy's studio, and a radiant face was thrust within the widening aperture.

"May I come in?" its owner said, in a loud whisper. "It is time for luncheon."

She left her chair and approached her visitor, with the intention of preventing his entrance.

"Clifford Lanman," she said, as severely as possible, holding the half-open door firmly, "I told you that you could not come at all to-day."

"I know it, I know it!" he returned, contritely, at the same time advancing a shapely leg to prevent a too-sudden closing of the door. "But you will want something to eat, I suppose; and so I thought that it would really save time if I came to eat with you, since you would not have so much to do in that line, you see." So saying, he walked gayly within, laughing, and bowing low to the dummy, in which he took a lively interest.

It was a sociable-looking dummy, of the feminine gender, with accommodating limbs which could be arranged to taste, and an equally accommodating crop of chestnut ringlets. It wore a skirt of crumpled drab cloth, and about its shoulders was thrown a yard or two of gorgeous peacock plush, disposed as a guide for a study of drapery. The small crape bonnet which it appeared to hold, seemed to fix the creature's intense interest.

"Is she thinking of buying that hat?" Clifford inquired, struck by its attitude of examination. "Oh, do buy it, mum; it'll become you like winkin'! We have n't the like of it in the shop;" after which salute he placed his own head-covering irreverently over the top of its flowing locks, and seated himself upon a small stool near Sophy's easel.

"Since you would come, you must entertain yourself," she said, glancing with persistent seriousness

at the folds of the peacock plush, and busily adding unimproving touches to her drawing.

"I came to take luncheon with you," he said, reproachfully; "and to save time, I brought it with me. *Will* you listen? I have six buns, six fat bananas, two pounds of cake, and a bottle of olives, outside the door. I was resolved not to tell you until I was sure that you were glad to see me; but now that I am satisfied upon that point, I will bring them in, or some of those lawyers may annex them;" and he tip-toed elaborately over the sounding boards, and deposited his bundles upon the table.

"Why did not you bring enough for an army?" she said, still working.

"I did bring enough for you and me; it amounts to the same thing. What I am anxious about is the quality; we had better try it, I think."

Seeing that she was not attending, he placed himself between her and her study, where her ever-anxious glance must fall upon him. "Attention, battalion!" he exclaimed, pompously, but in low tones. "If you do not stop that nonsense and attend to business now, at once, I will throw that green cloth out of the window."

"Don't you dare to touch a fold of it!" she said, throwing down her charcoal and rising. "That is Mr. Erskine's plush; he arranged it himself."

"Ah! is that his idea of the way a young lady should dress? But you are away from that old easel,—that is the main point; let us break our fast, and I will tell you a piece of news."

"Is it anything interesting?" she inquired, suspiciously.

"Judge for yourself. Uncle Lan came home last night."

"Is that all?"

He raised a warning hand. "Hear me out," he said, with dignity. "Uncle Lan was the bearer of the news, therefore I mention him as a prelude. What should you say if you and I were asked down to Frostmore to visit at the same time? The house is full of company, everything going on, and the—quite *the*—event of the season to come off two weeks from Saturday in the shape of a *soirée dansante*,—in other words, a ball; only I would n't say 'in the shape of a ball,' because I knew that it would give you a chance to be frivolous."

"I could not go to a ball," she said, sadly, but smiling, "and I cannot go down there again,—I have just come up; then, too, if I did go, I should have to visit at home, and not at Frostmore."

"Good heavens, what a wet blanket you are!" he exclaimed, impatiently slapping down a limp and empty banana-skin. "Now listen to me; it is my innings! No one expects you to go to a ball, but we could sit somewhere and hear the music. It is going to be something superior, I can tell you; and then again you would not have to stop at home, because your sister knows that you are to be asked to Frostmore: Uncle Wynne and Uncle Lan have called there several times. She does not need you, she has people with her. As for your staying here because you came a month ago,—well, two weeks, then,—what does it matter? A run down there and back does not amount to anything. So you must come; you simply must, you know."

She laughed. "Mr. Erskine would cut my acquaint-

ance," she said. "I have all that I can do to prove to him that I mean to work and am worth teaching. I should like to go, but I do not see how I can; besides, I have no invitation."

"You are to have it. I am preparing your mind to accept it when it comes. I am to be there, remember,—that in itself ought to be sufficient to influence you."

"It does, — I will not say which way. Seriously, though, I cannot think of stopping work. Mr. Erskine —"

"Oh, hang old Erskine! he will go himself. Miss Griswold will be there, and he will be wherever she is. And you will give it all up for that kind of thing," pointing disdainfully at her uninteresting drawing, "and for *him*!"

She laughed indifferently. "There are none so blind as those who won't—" she said.

"There are none so obstinate as those who will!" he retorted. "You could make a round dozen of people happy by accepting an invitation, and you decline it to keep well with that old adversary, who will never be pleased with you, whatever you do. Uncle Lan, Uncle Wynne, Mr. and Mrs. Frost, and I, have all set our hearts upon it, — our hearts; do you understand?"

She rose hastily and walked to the window. It was her first temptation.

"It would be fun," she said, facing about. "A day or two ought not to make very much difference if I worked all the harder afterwards."

"Of course not," he answered, rising delightedly, and upsetting with a crash the light stool upon which he had been seated.

Before he could proceed with his expressions of joy, a receding footstep was heard along the hall, — that of the departing saint. At the next minute there came a quick knock at Sophy's door, and Mr. Erskine entered, hardly waiting for permission to do so.

"I will see what you have been doing before I go to luncheon," he said, with a short, unspoken acknowledgment of Clifford's presence. Then he seated himself at the deserted easel.

"Have you lunched already?" he asked, inspecting her work with a frown.

"I — I was hungry," she stammered. "It will make the longer afternoon, you know," laughing nervously; "I mean to make a very long afternoon."

He arose. "The earlier you begin," he said, with a significant glance at Clifford's sulky young back, "the longer you can make it. I shall have to look at some of your other work; this is not sufficiently advanced. You do not block in your shadows boldly enough; I have told you that before. You see here — and here! Everything that you do is spoiled by the ragged look which it gets from your poor method. I will leave that drapery as it is for the rest of the week; and if you have the inclination to work," — with a contemptuous glance at the rakish solemnity of the grotesquely decorated dummy, — "you may make a study of it in color for tomorrow. On Saturday there is to be a good model at the Institute; you had better make a charcoal. On Monday, if you will be here early, I shall have time to attend to you before I begin the day. I have a sitter at ten o'clock. That is all, I believe."

Clifford waited motionless until the banging of the next door, the sharp rattle which tested the lock, and the lessening sound of the heavy footstep, told him that the late intruder had taken himself well out of the way. Then, with a tragic expression, he buried one of his hands in his hair, and clutched madly at his waistcoat with the other. "'Hold, hold, my heart!'" he quoted, melodramatically, after the manner of a popular tragedian, "'and you, my sinews, turn not instant old, but bear me stiffly up!'" Will you be good enough to tell me," he said, resuming his own manner, "if you enjoy being scolded and snubbed in your own room?"

All thought of Frostmore or of pleasure was gone from her now. "Do not let us talk about it," she answered, seating herself resolutely before her work; "I understand him."

"Do you? Of course if you like that style of teaching, I have nothing to say. There is certainly madness in his method, whether there is any method in his madness or not."

The Frostmore matter was not allowed to drop from Sophy's memory. The post brought her the official invitation in a cordial note from Mrs. Frost; Lanman called upon her one evening with verbal messages, and expressing his own friendly hope for her presence; while Clifford besought and quarrelled with her alternately over her renewed objections and final resolution to remain at work. The temptation had passed, easily driven from her mind by the thought of Erskine and his certain opinion of her poverty of spirit should she presume to decide upon neglecting, even for a day, the studies which he was pleased to direct. It surprised herself that she,

rendered always headstrong by the opposition of others, should be so utterly subdued through the fear of this man's disapproval. She was indeed afraid of him. She confessed it first to herself, and then laughingly she mentioned it to Clifford, in that manner wherein truth, from its very plainness, appears like jest.

She would not go to Frostmore, and was not to be persuaded; neither would she return home for a visit so soon after beginning her career. Jessie wrote to her, and Aunt Sophronia brought all the powers of her strong will to bear upon her; but she was firm. There was nothing for it but to let her have her way. Until the last possibility of altering her determination was passed, Mrs. Hurlingham cherished a hope that Sophy might yet relent in favor of this diversion; but the hope was vain.

"You must remember, Aunt Sophronia," she said, quoting an oft-repeated sentiment of her aunt's in bygone days, "that I take my obstinacy from you."

Mrs. Hurlingham's straight figure straightened. "But you did not take it all," she returned, with an expression which proved the truth of her words; "and that you shall live to learn, if you are fortunate."

CHAPTER XIV.

AS soon as Mrs. Hurlingham had thoroughly made up her mind that there was necessity for decided interference in Sophy's case, she contrived an opportunity to inform Walter of the subject of her reflections. The result, however, was hardly what she had expected; for although he did not dispute her theories, when she came to the point of her proposed remedy he flatly and firmly refused to act.

"Now that I have given my consent that she should work," he said, "I cannot refuse to allow her to continue merely because she is faithful. She told us at first that she intended to be so; it was only our impression that she would tire."

Walter was generosity itself. He made not the slightest reference to the real influence which had brought about the present state of things. Although he knew that had his aunt's advice fulfilled her expectations she would have taken all the credit to herself, he was none the less willing to save her the mortification of having counselled amiss, by himself adopting a share in the error.

But Aunt Sophronia was not grateful. "Frankly," she said, "I asked her here with the expectation that she would take a fancy to Mr. Begbie."

Walter stared. Mr. Begbie was a retired partner of Mr. Hurlingham's and several years that gentleman's senior, with no qualification for the position of suitor excepting that the death of his wife some years before had rendered the situation vacant and a new choice legally possible.

"He is a shy man," Mrs. Hurlingham went on, with that directness which characterized her. "I had some trouble in keeping him upon the same footing in the house after Sophy's arrival as he had been before; but now she will have nothing to say to him. I doubt very much if she has ever noticed him especially; and yet this is her opportunity. He needs encouragement, to be sure, as I told you he is shy. But he has quantities of money."

Walter had passed through all phases of feeling during this declaration, or rather he was conscious of a dazed transition through all sentiments, with the wish to indulge in the expression of no one in particular.

"I cannot think," he said, choosing his words slowly and carefully, to avoid giving offence, "that it would be well to consider Sophy ready as yet to settle down. I talked with her as earnestly as I knew how before she left home, and she persuaded me then that her greatest happiness would lie in the study of art. I am sure that she has no thought of marrying any one, and that it would be a mistake to suggest it to her. You know," he added, more confidently, "that Sophy will not accept other people's ideas; she will use her own. It only remains for us to place the best where she will be likely to adopt them; it is in this way that I have relied upon your advice to help her."

Mrs. Hurlingham interrupted him with a wordless exclamation not unlike a snort. "My 'advice'!" she repeated, derisively. "The sooner you get over the idea of her noticing my advice, the quicker you will be undeceived. I tell you, and you may as well believe me, that as she lives now she is without a chaperone. What can I do for her? She leaves the house for that studio of hers before I breakfast. She is alone there with this man as long as light lasts, — which is not as long, by the way, at this season of the year as it will be later. When she comes home she is as independent as you please, she dines with us, talks if she chooses, or if any one is here or comes in whom she does not particularly care to see, she goes to her room. Her mourning is a misfortune to her in more senses than one. People excuse her if she does not exert herself, and she is debarred by it from all active enjoyment."

"You have seen Mr. Erskine, have you not? You have been to the studio?"

"I went there once; but what good did it do? He was barely civil, and even that with an effort. Sophy says that it was because he does not wish to have her interfered with during the day. Oh, I heartily disapprove of the course affairs are taking! It is the most erratic, the most unheard-of proceeding that ever came under my notice, and I do not wish even to seem to be mixed up with it. If you still decline to put a stop to it, your foolish weakness may have the worst results."

Walter chafed under these far-from-reassuring remarks. "Why could she not have been satisfied at home?" he said, in useless regret. "She might have been happy there if she only would."

"It is too late to think of what she might have done," was the trenchant reply. "It would puzzle the prophets to determine what she will do."

And with these dark forebodings Walter was obliged to content himself. But he was not to be persuaded arbitrarily to forbid his sister's continuing her studies, nor would he hear of the introduction of Mr. Begbie's name to her notice. In fact, the interview brought little satisfaction to either party. Where there had been sympathy in action before, there was now direct opposition. Aunt Sophronia was by no means conquered.

Sophy was Walter's one real care ; all his other affairs allowed themselves to run in accordance with his desires. Business was absorbing, but satisfactory in its results ; Jessie was, as ever, so discreet, so far above mistake, as to be rarely in his mind ; and Rob was doing better at school than ever before in all his careless young life, besides showing an encouraging sense of honor in voluntarily reducing his pocket-money by half, and foregoing the possession of a promised bicycle, that he might be as small a drain as possible upon his brother. These things were all as they should be, and Walter reflected many times that he did wrong in feeling so severely the weight of the one burden which had been laid upon him ; but, as is often the case with trouble, it seemed to him that he could more easily have borne any rather than that. It was somehow so intangible, so impossible of comprehension. He wished to do the best ; but what was the best, and how could it wisely be accomplished ? He had lately been imagining that everything was as well as possible with his sister's affairs ; and now it was represented to him that

they were never in a more unsatisfactory state. The extent of his helpless ignorance frightened him.

For Sophy herself the days came and went easily enough. Sometimes they seemed long and wearisome, but still upon the whole they passed to her content. She had not yet begun to live, she told herself, but she was preparing for it; before many years had passed, her day would come. She suffered discouragement often when her utter inability to secure her teacher's spoken approbation made her doubt whether she could ever accomplish anything worthy the approbation of the world. Then also she was tired, — physically tired. Every day when it became too dark to work, the thought of a similar morrow seemed most impossible and useless. But the brisk walk home, the bountiful dinner and perfect night's rest, never failed to restore her strength and ambition; and custom at length taught her that it would be so, and saved her many a time from the depth of despair.

The lighter element in her life was supplied by Clifford Lanman, who, despite his growing involvement in social duties, seemed to consider the bare little studio as his half-home, and introduced several comforts with a view to rendering it habitable. Sophy remonstrated with him for his extravagance, but as a result he only ceased to consult her upon his intentions. He was as determined as she upon having his own way. His enormities culminated finally in the introduction of a large leather-covered lounge, which appeared one day at noon borne upon the shoulders of a pair of gasping but profane giants, who upon her showing a disposition to decline to

receive it, flatly refused to take it away again. Clifford wisely kept out of sight until the following day, when he ventured in, as usual, at the luncheon hour, with what air of innocence he might.

"If you do not promise me that this shall be the last thing," she said, declining to be deceived by his assumption of surprise, "I will put it out in the passage. I would have had the men take it away yesterday, but they would not carry it over the stairs again."

"Strange," murmured Clifford, glancing at its solid proportions; "I should have thought that they would be delighted. But really," he added, seating himself upon it, "this is a great improvement over a camp-chair; and why should you object to my making myself comfortable while I can? It was my duty in this case, at any rate. The opportunity was clearly providential; I bought it at an auction."

"What on earth were you doing at an auction?" she exclaimed, laughing.

"Why, you see the Howes were selling out, and I remembered that this used to be in their library; but still I never really thought of buying it. I even forgot that the sale was to be, until I was passing the house yesterday morning, when I just went in to find out whether the lounge was to be sold with all the other library things; and I found that it could be offered separately if I liked. Then I decided to be governed by the price; and as no one bid against me, I was really bound to take it, you see. I do not care for second-hand things as a rule, but I know this lounge, and it is all right."

"Yes, it seems to be. But you cannot make me believe in your being obliged to buy it; you bought

it because I spoke to you of the one at home, — I know you did. Really, Clifford, you must promise me not to do such a thing again.” So, after much skirmishing and equivocating, she secured the semblance of a promise, which however by no means prevented the appearance thereafter of continual candy and magazines, nor of a compressible set of hat-pegs, nor of a capacious wall-pocket, for the introduction of which articles he was always prodigal of excuses.

Clifford was to go abroad in the following spring. Of this he told her, and of his disapproval of the plan. He also brought her long stories of the various entertainments to which he was asked, and of the guests whom he met. He was evidently a heart-breaker; but he told of his escapades with a nice discrimination and a whole-hearted enjoyment of them all as a great joke, which betrayed not the slightest doubt of their being considered quite in the same light-comedy vein by the other parties concerned.

One young lady had favored him with a long brown tress of her hair in exchange for one of his own shining waves.

“What do you suppose she wanted of it?” he asked Sophy, laughing. “She cut it off with my knife; it hurt, I can tell you.”

Sophy looked jealously at his golden curls. “You must like to have people sawing off your hair,” she said, with a disdainful glance at the poor brown tress. “I think that she had the best of that bargain.”

Another admirer had bestowed upon him a glove. “If she had given me the other,” he remarked, genially, “you might have had the pair. I wanted to ask

her to match for it, double or quits ; but she probably wanted it for some other fellow. If I could find out who he was, I might match him. The young lady who gave it to me says that she is learning to play poker, but has learned only as far as that 'two of a kind beats three pairs' ! I told her that she must be quite a player already."

Clifford's entertainments were not always of so conventional a nature. One afternoon on overhearing a small colored girl singing to herself in the street, and knowing, as it chanced, that Erskine was absent from his studio, he immediately ingratiated himself with the little songster, and appeared shortly after in Sophy's studio with her at his heels.

"This," he said, disregarding Sophy's astonishment and presenting the child calmly, "is Mary Lizzie ! I have succeeded in securing her services for a private *matinée musicale*. Erskine gone ? I thought so. And the rest of the building vacant ? But never mind, if it is not, it soon will be. Ahem ! Her selections are of a mortuary nature, but executed with a vivacity which renders them as inspiring as martial music. Now, Mary Lizzie, begin, if you please,—that one about your mother, you know. By the way," he added, more seriously, "where is your mother ?"

"She cooks for a lady in a boarding-house," was the answer.

"Oh, that's all right, then ! Begin ! Do your best, and that shall be your reward ;" and he held up a good sized silver piece before her dazzled eyes, which he returned to his pocket as he seated himself.

Mary Lizzie could not understand very much that the young gentleman said, but she knew that he

meant to give her money, which she was expected to earn by singing.

Evidently resolved to deserve her pay, she grasped a fold of her little cotton skirt firmly in each hand, for a purchase, as it were; and then becoming entirely rigid, with her one little woolly pigtail standing out straight in sympathetic stiffness from the back of her head, she began her song at the very top of her lungs. The effect was as a barnyard king, who throws himself for the moment heart and soul, muscle and sinew, into his voice.

“Whey-ere is you’ mother, chile, wher’ is she gun?
She’s gun to hea-vun to dway-*Yull!*
She’s a resting in heaven with th’ yangels, I know,
To never turn backany mower.

“To never turn backany mor’, thang God!
To never turn back any-mo-*Wur!*
She’s a resting in heaven with th’ yangels, I know,
To never turn back any m-o-r-e.”

Clifford heard the song out in convulsions of smothered laughter. The young minstrel did not seem at all to object to the mirth at her expense. She only sang on as earnestly and loudly as she could.

After she had favored them with another rousing ditty beginning,—

“Fairwail, mer fren’, fairwail, mer dying fren’,”—

she was rewarded and allowed to depart.

“There,” cried Clifford when she had gone, “did you ever hear such a style? Strictly confidential, I should call it. I could see that you were diverted.”

Sophy dried her eyes. "It seems dreadful to be amused by such doleful sentiments, but I do believe it has done me good."

"Of course. It was a cure on the homœopathic principle,— *Similia similibus curantur*. I wish you could paint her picture in the act of singing; it would be a study."

Sophy arose hastily and rushed to the door, followed by Clifford. "Oh, stop her, stop her!" she cried; "find out where she lives."

But Mary Lizzie had disappeared.

And now the sittings for Miss Griswold's portrait were begun; and that charming sinner, who could do no wrong, succeeded in Erskine's daily work the berated saint who could apparently do no right.

The Sebastian was an order to be presented to a Catholic church of which the purchaser was a prominent benefactor; and so entirely was he pleased with the execution of the commission that he had promised to allow the artist the satisfactory privilege of exhibiting it previous to its delivery. This was almost the only redeeming point connected with this unloved labor, in which there were yet several sittings needed for completion; and the model continued to come and go, and to smoke his inferior cigars in the passage, so like and yet so different from that glowing image of himself upon the canvas where he stood with pinioned arms, up-lifted eyes, and girt loins; the likeness to the Holy Sebastian rendered beyond question by the appearance about his shoulders of the arrows of his persecutors, which in one or two instances had pierced his suffering flesh.

Often, if the youth had not taken his departure

before her arrival, Miss Griswold and her chaperone did Sophy the honor of waiting in her studio until Erskine should be ready to admit them.

Miss Griswold was charmed with Sophy's success.

"After all," she remarked to her sister, who accompanied her, "it is more satisfactory to paint heads than only to decorate. I seriously think that I shall take up heads after this."

"It requires work," Sophy answered, shortly.

"Yes, certainly; but I am very apt," was the satisfied answer.

Sophy made no reply. "She does not know what there is to know," she thought, loftily; "let her find out if she can."

Here Erskine's knock was heard at the door, and he entered, smiling and bowing, to greet the two ladies. It was Sophy's first experience of him as a smiling and bowing character.

"Oh, Mr. Erskine!" Miss Griswold said, in her silvery tones, "I am anxious to learn to paint heads. Do you think that you could teach me?"

Now let him wither her as she deserved! He knew the absurdity of that light whim. Fools might step in indeed where angels would fear to tread. Sophy was content. If she had made such a remark, he would not have left one of her mental supports standing upon another.

But before her astonished eyes Erskine only continued to smile and bow. "I should be delighted to try," he said, without hesitation.

"Miss Verrick thinks that it is so hard to learn. Do you not, Miss Verrick? But I told her that I could learn quickly; and could I not if you were willing to help me?"

And to whatever question she might demand assent, with those appealing eyes and captivating smiles, she should have it, were he thrice perjured in the giving.

After the first surprise of this interview Sophy was prepared for those which followed it. Miss Griswold came, and came again, and chattered her light and airy nothings in Sophy's studio quite frequently before betaking herself to her pose. In her careless gayety she would have liked Sophy's approbation. She told her much about herself and her occupations, and brought little snips of pale-tinted fabrics for evening gowns to secure her opinion as to their artistic beauty. But there was no answering confidence on Sophy's part. For some reason her work in these days seemed to become harder.

After all, was it worth while? Was anything worth while?

As for Erskine, he was smitten to the very heart; and as the days passed by he became more and more indifferent as to the possible betrayal of the fact.

Of Lanman, Sophy saw almost nothing. He was in the habit of calling occasionally at her aunt's house when he was in town, but his calls were sufficiently brief and formal to satisfy even Mrs. Hurlingham, whose first elaborate display of frigidity grew feeble for want of use. Sophy questioned Clifford timidly regarding him, but Clifford seemed to know very little. His uncle was tremendously busy all the time. He was seldom in town, and had stacks of invitations and business of all kinds to attend to when he was there. Clifford admitted that he had never seen so little of him in all his life; but since

he had begun to go about in the world, his uncle had withdrawn himself more and more.

"I should like to have him go wherever I do," he said; "but he seems to have an idea that it would look like tagging about after me. At least, I suppose that is it. I daresay that the very reason why he does not come here, is because he knows that I am here."

"Or because he knows that I am here," she said, with a faint smile. "Once he was very kind to me, and I was a perfect savage to him. Can you imagine such a thing?"

"No," he answered, promptly; "I cannot."

"It is all gone by now. He has forgotten it, and I am glad that it is so. You will not speak of it to him, will you? Not for all the world."

"Of course I will not. What an idea! You do not know him. I should no more dare to say anything to him in the least like gossiping curiosity than I should dare to knock him down; although I suppose that I could do the first, and I certainly could not do the last."

There was a long silence in the studio. Clifford returned to his interrupted novel, and Sophy to the little sketch which she was making of him as he read. At length she spoke again; but her words seemed to him *à propos* of nothing in particular.

"I do not know what I want," she exclaimed, despairingly pushing her easel from her and rising.

Clifford looked up questioningly. "Is that so?" he said, laughing, and holding a box toward her. "Then try a fig."

CHAPTER XV.

UPON a nipping day in November, as Sophy was returning to her studio from her belated luncheon at a neighboring restaurant which she frequented, she saw among the unknown passing through the figure of Lawrence Frost.

His greeting was all in warmth and cordiality that she could have desired.

"I return this afternoon," he said, in answer to her questioning, "and have only been in town since morning. If I had been here overnight, I should have called upon your aunt to inquire for you. Are you sure that you are very well? You look quite pale to me."

"It is nothing," she said; "this is the first time that you have seen me when I have not been burned brown. Why will you not call upon me now at the studio? Have you time? It is only a short distance away."

Work, or no work, she would invite him; and Mr. Erskine, whatever he might do or say to-morrow regarding her failure to satisfy his demands upon her time, could at least say nothing to-day, as he had left his studio for the afternoon, — which fact Sophy had learned from an announcement posted upon his door to that effect.

She preceded her willing caller up the several

flights of not-too-well lighted stairs, and guided him past the lawyers, the type-writer, and Erskine's deserted sanctum. Then she unlocked her own door and flung it wide.

As he entered, she was struck for the first time with the bare appearance of the room. Heavy curtains ran upon cords across the lower half of the window, and the sharp light which entered above them fell with unflattering clearness upon the carpetless, rugless floor, the pine table and pair of stools, and the stiff, ungainly steam-heater. Clifford's lounge was the one bright spot in the picture, and that was littered over with the papers and magazines which he had left upon it.

"I am afraid that it is not very beautiful," she said, looking about her with a deprecatingly frowning smile. "I am always so busy when I am here that I have no time to notice how it looks."

"It is very home-like and inviting, I am sure," he said, kindly. "You have a perfect light, have you not?"

He walked to the window and surveyed the vista of irregular roofs and chimneys visible over the top of the curtain. Then he seated himself at her invitation.

"Are you doing well here?" he asked, looking at her with interest as she sat opposite him. "Are you satisfied with the arrangement?"

"People are never quite satisfied in the world, are they?" she returned, evasively. "I am afraid it would not be possible for me to learn as fast as I should like."

"You should not overtax your strength," he

said, looking at her steadily; "that is poor economy. I am afraid that you have forgotten the axiom."

She clasped the support of her easel, and rested her head against her suspended arm.

"You are mistaken," she said, with a half smothered sigh,— "I do not work enough; and yet I have no time for anything else."

The sad little sigh did not escape him. "Do you have no recreation?" he asked, quickly. "Clifford spoke of several engagements, which he evidently believed in, to ride and skate with you."

She straightened herself primly. "It would not do," she said, with a manner very unlike her own. "It would take my mind off my work. Clifford and I have had a great many differences over the question, but he has surrendered at last. I quite congratulate myself upon my firmness."

Her visitor seemed about to speak with some earnestness, but he checked himself.

"You do not go about very much," he asked quietly instead; "you do not meet many people?"

"I go nowhere and see no one. I am glad of that: many friends are a great drawback to one's success. You see, circumstances are all with me. If I fail to make a mark, it will be only because I am incompetent."

"Yes," he answered, "I see it all." Then, still with an air as of a check upon himself, he arose hastily and walked away from her to the most pictured side of the room.

"And these are all your work?" he said, looking about him as he went, at the walls, half covered with the result of her studies old and new. "That is an

interesting head; and that — that is the river at Frostmore, is it not?"

"Yes, that is an old study; I have improved since then. I keep such as that only for encouragement. They are worth nothing."

"I have a fancy," he said, looking critically at those works of art nearest him, "to buy a picture. My collection is not large enough by half. "I mean to add to it, and to begin now while I am among the studios. What should I have to pay," he went on, in most business-like tones, "for that landscape?" and he indicated one of the old sketches which she had depreciated.

She raised her head quickly, and then arose and followed him to the other side of the room, taking on, as she went, a manner as business-like as his own.

"They are for sale, are they not?" he asked her.

"Certainly," she answered, composedly. "The entire collection is to be disposed of to the highest bidder."

"I cannot bid," he said. "Tell me the price of this one."

She did so without hesitation.

"And this?"

"That is larger, and so, of course, is more expensive."

"Ah! how could you try to give me the impression that they were not valuable? I think that if you please I will take this."

He detached it from the wall and held it toward her. It was the largest of them all, and by very far the poorest. She took it mechanically and looked

about her, laughing. "I am afraid that I have no wrapping-paper," she said. "All my other customers have supplied their own wrapping-paper and string."

She was losing her forced air of business, and betraying a little alarm as he gravely produced a long, slender letter-book, from which he evidently intended to make payment for his purchase. "Perhaps," she said, "perhaps you had better call again."

His only reply was to advance to the table and count out the money upon it, — an amount which she had jestingly made ten times as large as was reasonable.

"What kind of a frame should you advise?" he asked, straightening himself. "You need not be particular about putting it up. It must be left at the framer's, which is only a short distance."

She answered in a stifled voice, once more calling up her self-possession. "I should advise orange plush," she said, "with pale pink puffs at the corners."

He received the atrocious suggestion as soberly as it was offered. "Thank you," he answered; "it shall be attended to. I will not lose another moment. Good afternoon; I am delighted to have been so fortunate as to meet you."

He intended to go, then, and to leave all that money upon the table! In an instant she threw herself before the door.

"It was a joke," she cried; "it was only a joke! You must take it back!"

He made no steps toward its recovery, but advanced, holding the picture carefully before him.*

"Orange plush and pink puffs," he said, as if to himself; "I shall be sure to remember. Good afternoon."

But this was past endurance. As he was beginning to descend the stairs, he saw her standing above him.

"You must take it," she said hastily, almost in tears, crowding his deserted possessions into his hand, whether he would or no. "Keep that thing if you want it; I do not. You might have had any or all of them, but you would not understand me."

At the end of this coherent sentence the tears were falling down her cheeks and dropping upon her hands, which held tightly to the stair-rail. Although each lawyer should appear and behold them; although the type-writer should witness the scene and type-write the news to each of her mechanical correspondents; although the grieved, alarmed expression in the face below her trebled itself, — she could not have held back those ready tears.

"I have hurt you," he said, remorsefully. "It was stupid of me; I am sorry."

Five minutes later she was alone, seated at her lofty window, crying to her heart's content, and the disturbing sketch lay a little pile of ruin upon the table.

"I have displeased him," she thought. "He was so silent, and he went away so fast, without even asking me not to cry."

Wherefore, as no one had asked her not, she continued to mourn, until by the time she dried her eyes and shut out the lower light preparatory to resuming her work, the short afternoon was far spent, and the prospect of Erskine's rebuke so certain as to

engender a despairing indifference to it as to the inevitable.

Clifford Lanman was attiring himself with elaborate simplicity for a dinner. The evenings when he was at leisure were becoming fewer and farther between. As he advanced in his toilet, he emerged from his dressing-room ever and anon, keeping up the conversation with his uncle, who was seated before the fire in their common sitting-room.

"I am glad you take to your social duties so kindly," Lanman said, crossing his slippered feet more comfortably upon the foot-rest, and settling himself against the down chair-cushion; "it is an excellent thing. I only hope that you will be as pleased with your college duties when they begin."

"Oh! duty," Clifford answered, seating himself in an easy attitude upon the arm of the sofa to fasten his cuff-link, "duty is sometimes dangerous. Miss Verrick told me only yesterday of a man whose grave-stone she had seen, which recorded of him that he 'died by the discharge of his duty.'"

Lanman laughed. "There is no fear of that fate for you," he said. "Do you see a great deal of Miss Verrick?"

"I look in at her studio almost every day. When she will let me stay, I stay. Sometimes when she is very busy she will not have me."

"Quite sensible on her part. How is she now?"

"She is first-rate, I am glad to say. She is about the only girl I ever saw who could really be a companion to a fellow. There is not a bit of affectation about her."

Clifford was putting in a good word for his friend. If that which she had told him of having been rude to his uncle had in reality offended that gentleman, he should at least be reminded of something attractive in her. Had he received any encouragement, he might have continued to express his sentiments; but Lanman made no reply to his last remark, and the subject was allowed to rest.

Clifford departed early for his evening amusement; for the dinner at which he was expected was to be succeeded by a theatre party, which necessitated an early hour, and the residence of his hostess was in quite a distant part of the city.

As he was about muffing himself in his thickest top-coat, making such valedictory remarks to his still silent uncle as suggested themselves, a knock was heard at the door, and Mr. Frost appeared before them.

"Ah! Clifford, are you off?" he said. "How are you, Lan? Do not be too astonished at seeing me. I decided not to take the four o'clock, after all."

Lanman arose and pushed back his chair. "Hullo!" he exclaimed. "Where did you come from? You are the last person that I expected to see. But since here you are, you will dine, of course. I am alone. Cliff, as you go out just look in at the café and tell Lamont that I will be served here to-night. He can send in a menu at six o'clock. You do not care to dine before seven, do you, Frost?"

His guest had already divested himself of his out-of-door covering, and was seated comfortably, as one at home.

"I do not care to dine at all," he said; "any-

thing will do, and as late as you like. I shall not go down to the house to-night, I think. Is Mr. Wynne here?"

"No, that is all right; you can have his rooms. If you will see to that, then, Cliff. And good-night; don't make it too late."

"Lanman," said his friend, when they were alone in the warm, luxurious room, "something has happened to-day about which I have decided to speak to you."

Lanman was bending to place fresh logs in the fire-basket.

"Stocks gone off," he asked, reaching for the bellows, "or are they going?"

"It has nothing to do with the market. I called at Miss Verrick's studio this afternoon."

The bellows gave one fearful gasp, and resumed their even, gentle puffing.

"Well," said Lanman, quietly, "what then?"

"Then I simply proceeded to make an ass of myself; that is all."

Lanman attempted to hang the bellows in their place, but only succeeded in dropping them with a great clatter upon the tiled hearth."

His friend was silent while he replaced them and seated himself. Then he recounted the story of his call at the studio as it appeared from his own standpoint, putting a far different construction upon his actions from that which Sophy had imagined in her mistaken regret.

"She looked so pathetic," Frost said, "with her head upon her arm, and so lonely and so young, that I was beside myself to comfort her somehow; and as I could not indulge any such sentiment as

that, I flew off to talking of her sketches. Then it occurred to me that perhaps the sale of one would encourage her. That was the way the trouble arose, and I, like a blockhead, had not sense enough to stop when the joke had gone as far as she pleased, and so it ended in my walking away and leaving her —" he suddenly checked himself. He could not bring himself to speak of her tears.

"And leaving her?" repeated Lanman, listening intently.

"Vexed enough, I am afraid. But it was not to be avoided; I did my best. The situation was a difficult one; there was no satisfactory way out of it."

Lanman was silent. "Why do you tell me this?" he asked, at length. "What can I have to do with it?"

"You might have much to do with it," was the significant answer. "Ever since you first met her I have had the knowledge that you were especially interested in her."

Lanman denied nothing. "If you knew of it as long ago as you say, you knew it before I did," he said.

"That is quite possible; I have heard of such cases. How long is it since you saw her?"

"Hardly since she has been in the city. To tell you the truth, Frost, I was persuaded that her affection was not for me, and I have kept out of her way."

"You had spoken to her before she came here, then? Do not answer the question if you do not wish to do so. I am interfering with your affairs, I know, but only because I believe that our friendship

is sufficient to warrant it. I would accept it from you if circumstances were reversed."

"I had no thought of interference," said Lanman, quietly. "I have never asked her to marry me, if that was your question; and the reason that I did not do so was because, from conversation which we had, I was sure that she did not care for me in the slightest degree."

"How did you discover it?"

"It was unmistakable in many ways."

He arose from his chair and stood upon the hearth-rug. Then he turned to the mantelpiece and lighted a cigar.

"If you could see her as I saw her this afternoon," his friend pursued, "so pale and forlorn, with her mistaken ideas of success and her pride in concealing her evident discouragement. She did not confess to me that she was becoming discouraged, as indeed why should she? So, of course, I did not see it, and refrained from offering her the least counsel. It seemed almost wicked not to try to put things before her in a truer light; but I am so far removed a friend that I could not bring myself to do it. She is certainly imbibing some very sad notions. I wonder if Erskine inculcates them."

"I do not know."

"He has never had any other pupil, has he?"

"I believe not."

"It is a pity that he ever discovered her. He has no idea of anything but work, and he will drive her beyond her endurance before he will see that he has been overdoing it. He overdoes it himself; but then he can, of course, bear more than she."

Lanman threw his cigar into the fire.

"It was I," he said, "who made it a point that he should teach her. I never thought that affairs would take such a turn. I knew that he was an enthusiast in his profession, and a decent kind of a fellow. It seemed to me the very thing."

"It was a mistaken kindness, that is all; and perhaps may not prove so mistaken as it seems."

"I shall see her," said Lanman, re-seating himself; "I must see her."

"Certainly you must; and now, if you have arrived at that decision, my mission is accomplished. Allow me to congratulate you beforehand."

Lanman clasped his fingers behind his head. "Never," he answered; "that would insure disaster."

The other laughed heartily. "You are worse hit than I thought," he said. "When I see you giving way to superstition, I know that something extraordinary possesses you."

Lanman laughed at himself. "I will take all the chances in my favor that there may be, if you please," he said, "superstitions inclusive."

The evening hours sped silently along, and still the same topic, or others connected with it, formed the subject of conversation.

It was after midnight when Clifford returned from his evening's pleasuring; and when he did return he found the two men, whom he had left quietly seated together by the fire, in a most unusual hilarity over a brace of rarebits and ale.

"So there you are!" cried Lanman, as his nephew entered; "and not yet one o'clock. Good boy! Will you have something? or have you been at supper?"

Clifford laughed, and shook himself out of his wraps. "Don't talk of supper to me," he said; "I shall fast for a month after this. But how snug and comfortable you are! Generally when I come home the fire is burned out, and the room is as dark as Egypt, with not a soul to speak to. Such a festive change makes me jolly wide-awake. Will you hear the latest news? Of course you will. Miss Griswold was there. She has a fresh admirer, — very young, very devoted!"

"No gossip, Cliff!" suggested his uncle.

"By no means; I only want to show you how I rose in her favor. She began by bowing distantly to me. I returned it inversely as the square of the distance. Then what do you think she did at supper?"

"I cannot possibly imagine."

"She complimented me on my appearance."

"I suppose that that was the best she could say of you."

"Very likely; she does not know me at all well. She did not compliment me on my uncle."

"Very likely; she does not know *me* at all well either."

Clifford laughed uproariously. "What have you been doing to him?" he asked, addressing their guest. "He has not been like this for months. It cannot be the exercise that I gave him with the foils this afternoon."

"I think," said Frost, mischievously, "that it is the effect of something which he has heard this evening. Ask him what it was."

Thus encouraged, Clifford rapped the table after the manner of one who calls for a speech, and demanded the news.

Lanman laughed, and threw down his napkin. "Frost, you are incorrigible," he said. "The news, you young rascal, was various and sundry; but principally to the effect that small pitchers with abnormally developed ears are about to be abolished by law. Do you wonder now that I am joyful?"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE morning succeeding the afternoon of Mr. Frost's visit at her studio did indeed bring with it to Sophy the retribution which she had anticipated, but not in such measure as might under the circumstances have been expected.

Erskine gave her directions and instructions for new work, signifying his displeasure only in coldly scorning to criticise her meagre progress of the day before.

Late in the morning, as she was devoting herself with redoubled energy to her work, she heard Miss Griswold's tripping arrival at his studio, and the lively chatting and laughing of herself and her chaperone as she removed her wraps and prepared to pose. It was the bright prospect of this visit, then, it occurred to Sophy, which had saved her a severe reprimand.

"Some like apples, and some like onions," she thought, philosophically. "She is the one he likes, whichever it is, and I — I am the other!"

Miss Griswold having no parents living, made her home with her married sister when she had use for a home. A rather shirking chaperone the lady was, billeting her charge, whenever it was possible, upon other suitable duennas, and bearing the burden

herself only when it became absolutely necessary. And Miss Griswold was equal to the situation. A merely nominal chaperone was all that she needed, all that she would have borne. She knew the proper pursuances of society, and the circumstances of the most eligible young man in the field, as well as if she had been blessed with forty married dames to enlighten her, and was in every way fitted to seek her young fortune for herself.

As Sophy continued to meet her from time to time, she came to reflect with wonder upon the half-tender, half-ridiculing, wholly insincere manner which this daughter of fashion and the times displayed toward the erratic painter, her adorer. It could not be that she was in love with him, — any one but he himself might have seen that; but if that were not so, what was the reason for her attitude toward him? For she was always utterly gracious, entirely alluring; and in bringing her friends, by his permission, to inspect and criticise the growing portrait, there was no young gentleman among them, though he were the main chance of the season, to whom she would listen in preference to Erskine, or from whom she would receive attention, were he able to offer it instead. Perhaps she intended to marry him after all, — at least she was charming him into putting his best efforts into his work for her, with the knowledge that it must bring her fame.

Miss Griswold was as entirely a society specimen of humanity as one could readily imagine. Her sister indulged her every whim, with the stipulation that she personally should not be too much disturbed in her indolent semi-seclusion. As regarded the young lady's education, she had been

equally allowed to consult her own tastes, and her tastes led her by no means in the steep and painful path of learning; and yet, who shall say that the course along which her inclination did lead required less varied demands upon the intellect than that which to many presents more hope of profit? She, and such as she, are of the present period, of the passing day. What boots it to them to know of ancient Greece or Magna Charta, of Peter the Great or of Sebastopol? It is the events of to-day wherein they must be proficient; and who shall say that it is not a difficult undertaking to study constantly the changing whims and humors of one's fellow-beings and of fashion; to cultivate a memory for infinitesimal happenings, for the ready recounting of scandal or of *bons mots*?

Miss Griswold knew the name, age, and prospects of every young man who had been presented to her during four seasons. She knew the object, direct or indirect, of every dowager, and the chances of matrimonial success, possible or probable, of every girl of her own position. Shift, pass, change as they might, she was well up with every fashionable combination of circumstances. Yet her lack of information upon other points was sometimes quite astonishing.

One day, while waiting in Sophy's studio to begin her sitting with Erskine, she chanced to mention the angel of the resurrection as "the angel of Gabriel," and did violence to generally accepted tradition by referring to that mysterious being as a woman.

Clifford, who was present, devoted himself exclusively thereafter to the view of the chimney-tops,

until, as she took her departure, he broke down completely, smothering his roars by rolling himself in the curtains.

"Did you hear her?" he chuckled. "'The angel of Gabriel. *She!*' I never would have believed it, if I had not heard it."

Sophy quieted him with harmless threatening. "How do you know," she said, with less demonstrative mirth, "that the angels are not all women? For my part, I think it more than probable. And as for information, of what use is it? People are no happier for it, nor any more successful; I often find myself envying Miss Griswold."

"Heavens, what heresy! And why do you envy her? On account of her alarming intelligence, or her beauty? She has a figure like a hat-rack."

"She has the only kind with the possibility of style about it; you would admire it in any one else. I envy her because she leads such an easy life and is so able to satisfy her ambition: to have that ability is happiness, whatever the ambition may be. Where is the use in slaving yourself to death when you can do as well and better without?"

"That is just what I say. 'Cromwell, I charge thee, fling away ambition.' But you need not begin a life of ease by envying an idiot."

"I have no intention of beginning a life of ease at all. But why do you dislike her so? You never speak of any one else as you do of her."

"I know it, and I hope you will believe that I do not speak so, even of her, generally. But your lingering admiration for her always exasperates me; I never can resist trying to slay it. She really is not worth your notice."

"Surely she can do something well! She dances well, for instance."

"Well enough; but you should see her latest admirer! She seems quite devoted to him; but it cannot be on account of his powers in that line, he dances like a bucking broncho!"

"Ah, well! They belong to one variety of being, and I to another. It would be impossible to change either."

"Thank Heaven for that! If it were not so, I might live to see you devoting your entire time to manicures and hair-dressers, and forgetting to be sensible. You are near forgetting that now, I am afraid."

"I know it," she answered, laughing; "in your society I should be apt to. You must go now, or else be quiet. I cannot waste another minute on you."

Since her recent interview with Mr. Frost the idea of the sale of her studies had several times occurred to Sophy. She could part with them to an indifferent person, she thought, without injuring her feelings in the least, if only an indifferent person could be induced to think them desirable. The difficulty lay in finding time at her disposal that should still be precious daylight, in which to offer them to a dealer. Secretly she rather shrank from the task; but she told herself that it was part of a career which must embrace business ability as one of the elements of its success. Therefore, however unwilling she might find herself in spirit, she would not allow herself to bodily turn from the cultivation of anything so essential.

The days moved by, and November's stripped twigs and sharp foretastes of winter were about to give place to the snows and ice-blasts of the succeeding month. Sophy had reached one of those periods in her work when progress seems at a stand-still, leading her almost to believe that the limit of her possible attainment had been reached. There was no one to bestow on her a cheering word, though she needed it never so badly.

One afternoon, when she had been even less successful than common, and had received a parting rebuke of unusual venom from Erskine, she threw down her brushes in utter despair; and although her model, a young roman-ochre street urchin, had still an hour of intermittent pose before him, she arose and dismissed him.

"You are to come to-morrow," she said, impressively. "You understand?"

He nodded. "Me urstan'," he asserted.

What might not one who knew their value, she thought, do with such a pair of orbs as those which indiscriminating Nature had set within that grimy little visage! So dark and lustrous, so melting and curling-lashed! Yet were they so many dazzling possibilities thrown away.

After the small gamin had shuffled from her presence, she completed the necessary preparations for her own departure; and careless of the loss of the yet remaining hour of daylight, — poor, pinched little days they had now become, — she took two of her smallest canvases under her arm and sallied resolutely forth into the street.

Before the window of a second-class establishment for the sale of artist's materials and the results of

their use, she stopped. She dared not yet aspire to the larger dealers. As she looked at the display here set forth before her, she gathered some encouragement. Was not the head of that meditatively tearful maiden quite too large for her slim, pink-draped body and bare, carefully rounded arms? And had that smiling cherub, opposite, india-rubber joints, or had it sustained comminuted fractures of its limbs before sitting to its presumably faithful portrayer? The coloring was there, rosily, snowily idealized; but where was the drawing which she was being trained to respect so highly?

She turned the low-set handle of the door and entered the shop. With a confidence which surprised herself, she placed her two canvases before the man who came forward to receive her. They were a pair of small heads, studied from life and finished at stolen moments with the object of thus disposing of them.

"I came to see if you would look at these," she said, shortly. Then she stepped back and made no further remark, while he ran them over with a careless eye.

"They're not bad," he said, squinting hideously and trying to smile amicably at the same time. "The only trouble is that we have more of this kind of thing already than we can sell. If they was either of 'em doin' somethin' now, — for instance, cryin', or lookin' at a piece of hair!" Sophy thought of Clifford and his love-locks. "Those are the things that sell. Did you happen to notice that one in the window, twenty-four by thirty, — that young woman thinkin' maybe her lover's drowned, — in the pink dress? That's the style. That was

only in the window since yesterday, and we've had three parties in to ask the price. It's bound to sell."

So that young person with the swelled head was mourning the possible loss of a lover!

"Since that one is thinking, why might not these be thinking also?" she suggested, hardily.

"Then they'd oughter clasp their hands, or have tears in their eyes, or smile. Subject's everythin'! 'Tain't so much in color, though it is somethin' in that, too. You want to dress 'em up bright, or else not at all; and they'd oughter be pretty, — a pretty girl ought to be able to paint pretty girls."

She reached forth and withdrew her work from beneath his desecrating eyes.

"Good evening," she said, coldly; "I can see that they will not do."

The man followed her to the door in a genial glow of conscious amiability. He might have been short with her; who was she that he should not have dismissed her summarily? But he had been affability itself; he had even given her gratuitous advice for her future guidance. So he was serenely pleased with himself. Virtue is its own reward. "Bring us in something else," he said, laying a lingering hand upon the door-knob. "Get us up something such as I've mentioned, and we'll think about it. I can't say much fairer'n that. We'll think about it, and see what we can do;" and he bowed her effusively out, and returned to congratulate himself upon his charming manner, while she, entirely crestfallen, hastened farther and farther from him through the chilly streets.

Determined not to be conquered by her disgust, she resolutely directed her steps toward another

more pretentious establishment. Upon her entrance a bustling damsel, attired in a highly ornamented gown, with a well-pointed lead-pencil thrust through one of its button-holes, tore herself reluctantly from smiling communion with a weak-eyed youth who wore his hat and chewed airily upon a toothpick held at an acute angle in the corner of his mouth. The remorse of the young clerkess at having allowed her companion to depart in favor of so entirely unrenumerative a customer as Sophy proved to be, was genuine and ill-disguised.

"Mr. Moss is not here to-day," she said. "But I know he don't want anything like that; he's got in his Christmas stock already."

Once more Sophy was fain to leave her errand unaccomplished. She would attempt no more that day. Still, she must return her rejected offerings to the studio, or Aunt Sophronia might ask awkward questions about them.

But she had not gone far before she discovered that she had lost her way. Thinking to inquire, she walked some distance studying faces, to choose one which might please her, without being sufficiently attracted by any. At length she decided to accost a policeman who lingered upon a crowded corner. He was a good-natured man, who found the task of explaining her route so difficult that he was under the necessity of taking her by the arm and leading her to the curb, the better to point and wave out the directions and turns which she must take. The act was meant in kindness, she could see; but there was something terribly professional in the manner in which his fingers closed upon her shrinking arm, and the grudging deliberation with which he

finally let her go, as if that were a department of his business which must be administered with discretion.

As she mounted her darkening stairway, she passed a descending figure which stopped upon seeing her, and spoke her name. It was Lanman.

"I have been trying to inquire for you," he said; "but you had gone, and Erskine has gone, so I was about giving it up."

The presence of any one to whom she was known, after her recent trying experience, was a great and restful pleasure to Sophy, and she received her visitor with a most flattering delight, inviting him to wait for her while she went to her room, and then to walk with her toward her aunt's house.

As they crossed a broad, pleasant street whose perspective narrowed itself away beyond them, Lanman stopped. "Why should you go home?" he suggested. "It is not nearly time for dinner yet. We might walk, if you cared to do so."

Sophy's spirits were recovering their usual tone. The sense of absolute safety which she was enjoying through the presence of so able a protector, and the freedom of action and warmth of her young blood, made her forget her late heaviness of heart. "I believe that I could walk twenty miles," she said, with blooming cheeks.

"Things are going well with you, then," he inquired; "you are contented and happy?"

She reflected for a moment. "I do not know why I should be," she answered, "but I think I am."

"You get very tired, of course?"

"Very, dreadfully!"

"But Erskine? He is a satisfactory teacher, is he not?"

She laughed, not mirthfully. "He is almost too good; he requires so much. I have never once — not one time — been able to do as well as he has expected of me."

There was a little dreary ring in her tone which he detected. As he was casting about in his mind for a remark which should properly express his sympathy without displaying it in all its strength, Erskine himself, among those who were passing in an opposite direction, stopped before them.

"Why have you left so early?" he asked her, after a brief salute to Lanman. "It is barely five o'clock."

"I was tired," she answered, doggedly. "I did not want to work any more; I could not. I had some errands to do, and it was not worth while to go back."

"This is the third time this week that you have chosen to shorten your day," he went on, querulously; but she interrupted him.

"It is the second," she said, redly; "only the second."

"And if it be only the second," he pursued, still unconvinced, "it is a waste of time. One needs every minute in every day, especially at this time of year, when there is so little light. Did you tell the boy to come the day after to-morrow?"

"I told him to come to-morrow."

"What," he exclaimed, impatiently, "you were to work at the Institute to-morrow!"

She looked thoroughly uncomfortable. "I forgot it," she acknowledged, biting her lip.

Erskine made a little gesture toward Lanman, as though he would call attention to the difficulty of his position; and Lanman, thus mutely addressed, was by no means loath to have a voice in the conversation.

"Do you not consider that Miss Verrick improves?" he asked, almost brusquely. "Does not she accomplish all that could be expected of her with reason?"

"By no means," was the painfully frank reply. "It is some time now since Miss Verrick's heart has been in her work. It requires all my effort to keep her up to it."

He had taken himself along his interrupted way, and they also had resumed their walk. Sophy's cheeks, rosy before, were flaming now. If the wind had struck her with its sharpest lash instead of with that little ice-touched breath, she would not have found it too cold. As for Lanman, he walked on mechanically at her side in complete silence. She was the first to speak and break the spell.

"At last," she said, more in her own voice than he had been expecting to hear her, "at last the secret is out, and you are the first to know of it. I have no ability. Mr. Erskine would not teach me another day but for the fact that you originally suggested it."

"I did not hear him question your ability," Lanman answered, quietly; "and he was vexed over something just now."

"He was not vexed. He is always like that with me. I knew long ago that he did not think me worth his labor. Still, he has never neglected me. Heaven knows, he has tried faithfully to bring me up to his

standard, and I have tried faithfully to reach it, but I have never succeeded; he was mistaken in me."

Lanman so far forgot himself as to look entirely concerned; but he controlled his words. "Your aunt," he said, hastily, — "is she more willing than she has been that you should work? Does she make it easier for you?" He put this leading question with a kind of embarrassed determination.

"Aunt Sophronia and I hardly speak now," she said, quietly; "I ought not to stay there. Our own house is to be sold by and by, and I suppose that Jessie will live in town then, and I shall live with her. The poor old house!"

"You would not like to see it sold, then?"

"If we could keep it for a home, I should be glad; but we cannot do that always. I did not care about being there at all once, but now the old things seem to be passing away so that I am quite maudlin over it. I am strong and young," she went on, after a pause, her mind reverting to the former subject; "I do not see why I should fail. But I have no perseverance, that is all."

"All!" he cried, disdainfully. "If that were all, it would be the least part of the difficulty. You are wasting — worse than wasting — all the best of your life in work and alone, and I am to thank that it is so."

"It is no one's fault, — yours least of all; but it has been a failure."

"I am glad of it," he said, bluntly, not attempting farther consolation; "I shall be glad if it proves to be so."

"I cannot give it up yet," she burst forth, suddenly; "it is only fortune which has been in some way against

me. It will pass in time if I persevere. I will not give up trying. How could I bear to live without it now? Jessie and I alone, with nothing to do? It would be dreadful."

"Your sister might marry."

She smiled. "It is not likely, I should think; but if she did, I should be all the more lonely and in need of employment."

"And you never think of marrying?"

"When I think of Jessie marrying, I am obliged to think of following her example; but I should never alarm myself over it until then. We shall swim peacefully along together all our lives, she and I, — I can see that."

"You think of her as I do of Mr. Wynne, I suppose, — that she is matrimony-proof."

"I do indeed. I think it of her, I know it of myself. One can always tell best about one's self."

They were approaching Mrs. Hurlingham's house by this time.

"Do you remember our conversation when we were at Mr. Wynne's together?" he asked. "That day in the churchyard?"

"Yes, I remember it."

"I asked you then to accept me for your friend, and you refused."

"I know it," she said, meekly; "I was wrong."

"I resolved at the time," he continued, "never to renew the subject. But now it seems to me that it might be different if I were to speak of it to you."

"It is different; I have too few friends to decline one upon any terms. I did not realize what I was

doing then, or I should never have driven you away."

"And perhaps some day," he said, hastened, despite his resolves, in his ultimate intention, "you will give me the right to ask you for something more?"

He said it so quietly, in so matter-of-fact a tone, that it was over without alarming her. Unexpected as was the attack, with no sudden shock she realized that which had come to her.

"It might be so," he persisted at length, seeing that they were arriving at the house, "might it not?"

"When Jessie is married," she returned, laughing; "I should not think of it until then."

Lanman said no more. His ring at the bell was answered by the usual attendant; but, contrary to custom, Mrs. Hurlingham stood behind the man, smiling broadly.

"Ah, Sophy!" she cried, in unwonted excitement, "and you, Mr. Lanman, you must come in and hear our news; you also are interested in it. Come in. We expect you to dine to-night."

Sophy exchanged a glance with Lanman as they were ushered by their bustling hostess into the brightly lighted library. There was no question as to her being out so late, no surprise or displeasure at his unwonted presence. Something very unusual must have happened.

As they entered the room Walter arose from the sofa and approached her.

"You may as well tell her now," said Mrs. Hurlingham; "the sooner she knows of it, the better."

"Sophy," said Walter, impressively, "Jessie has written to me to-day to announce to me, and to ask

me to announce to all of you," his eyes travelled quickly from one of his little audience to another, "her engagement,"—Sophy felt as if some one were reciting a service over her; at his last words she sank suddenly into a chair,— "her engagement," pursued her brother's steady voice, "to Mr. Wynne."

Lanman uttered an exclamation.

"What is the matter with you two?" cried Mrs. Hurlingham, delighted at the success of her surprise. "What do you mean by falling about here like a set of blocks? Come to dinner now, without another word; and after dinner we can talk it over."

CHAPTER XVII.

ON the following morning as Sophy, in an unaccountably happy, self-reliant mood, walked toward her studio, she encountered Clifford Lanman at a neighboring corner, out of the reach of the cutting wind, lying in wait for her.

Since the advent of the lounge he had been more constant than ever in his attendance at her studio; and she had become accustomed to having him about, as well as indifferent as to Erskine's preference in the matter. So she had ceased to raise objections to his presence, and there was seldom a day when he failed to find time to bestow himself and his confidences in some degree upon her. To-day, however, he could not bring himself to postpone his appearance until his customary hour of noon. He also had heard the news of the engagement, and had torn himself from his slumbers a full hour earlier than was his wont, that he might the sooner have an opportunity of discussing the astonishing state of things with her, whose interest he felt sure would equal his own.

"I wanted to look at you," he cried, scudding along at her side and holding down the cape of his ulster by main force. "I wanted to see how you were taking the surprise."

"Delighted, I am sure," she returned, "at anything which will bring you to the surface at such

a praiseworthy hour in the morning. You look beaming!"

"Ah, you perceive the beam in my eye, but say nothing of the rafter that fills your own! So we are to be related! Is not that a lark?"

"That is certainly pleasant. What relation shall we become when a gentleman who is nothing whatever to you marries my sister?"

"Own cousins," he answered, promptly. "Uncle Wynne thinks that he is my uncle, I have always called him uncle, and his house is the only home that I have ever had. I am probably quite as much interested in his marriage as you are."

"If my sister should marry your uncle," she said, reflectively, "that would make me more an aunt to you than anything. I should be your Aunt Sophronia."

Clifford laughed. "I must practise looking up to you," he said, "if I have to go down on my knees to do it. But in the mean while, what kind of a young lady is your sister? I do not see why I did not notice her more especially that evening when we called; I am generally observing enough."

"So you are; there is no doubt of that. But it is like Jessie to escape notice. She is one of the kind who keeps everything, herself included, up as nearly to a pitch of perfection as can possibly be. And she seldom talks or laughs."

"I should have said that she was doing her share when I saw her," he demurred.

"Then you would have said wrong; it was Mr. Wynne who talked for both. That is exactly the point about her, — she appears to say as much as any one; you never notice any gaps: but she does not do it."

Clifford shivered. "Boo!" he exclaimed; "that is creepy! But she knows everything, does she not? And she won't make any rows?"

"She is a walking encyclopedia, and perfect peace is her chief delight."

"Ah, well!" he sighed, with a burlesque air of large generosity, "it will not do to expect too much. 'Old heads upon young shoulders we must not expect to find.' I am glad to hear so much that is satisfactory; and as for the talking, I shall be obliged to get along by doing it all myself."

"It will be a wrench, will it not?" she laughed.

"It will," he returned, with serious lips and dancing eyes; "but that is as nought. I shall rejoice at the wedding, and present them with my blessing. I am good for a blessing, if for nothing more. Farewell now; I am starving to death. Expect me 'anon, or about that time.'"

At the luncheon hour he appeared again, still in his customary jovial mood, but with a little extra breadth in his smile.

"Have you told Erskine?" he asked, not considering it necessary to finish his sentence.

Sophy had worked with all her might during the morning, and her efforts had been crowned with more of success than had been common with her of late. She put down her stick and palette with its sheaf of brushes, and rose willingly to her feet.

"We will go and tell him now," she said. "I am sure I do not see why he should be told at all; but of course there is no reason why he should not, and he probably will not like to be interrupted, — which makes it worth our while. Come with me."

Clifford settled his hair elaborately and buttoned

his coat closely about him. "I did not expect an invitation to be present," he said, giving a final tweak to his necktie; "but you shall not see me flinch. Lead on!"

With smothered laughs they passed together to the artist's door and knocked, whereat the profound silence which had prevailed within the room was broken by a petulant command to enter. At this sound the confidence of the two visitors nearly failed them. However, whether or not it was possible to preserve a straight face and dignified demeanor, it was certainly too late to withdraw; and to the accompaniment of a stentorian "Ahem!" from Clifford, they reinforced their self-command sufficiently to enter.

Mr. Erskine had evidently expected to see any one else. He arose to receive them in uncontrolled amazement, holding in one hand a large wooden spoon, in the bowl of which a small landscape was beginning to grow greenly. Before him upon a stool were several other spoons yet to be decorated, while near by sat Miss Griswold, unchaperoned this time, holding in her delicate finger-tips still another of those humble implements, which she was inspecting carefully.

Sophy's courage arose to the emergency. "I am afraid that I may have disturbed you," she said, bowing comprehensively. "But I am sure," she continued, finding that no one appeared likely to assist her with polite assurances, "that when you hear the delightful news which I have to tell, you will be glad that I came. Ah!" she exclaimed, pretending to catch sight for the first time of the object of Erskine's employment. "Spoons! How beautiful!

Are there many, — more than two? Oh, certainly, I see; how stupid of me! Shall we be seated? Thank you. We cannot stay long, but we will have chairs while we are here."

"Mr. Erskine has consented," Miss Griswold explained, not without embarrassment, "to do some painting for me for a german. Is not he kind? I brought these this morning, and was waiting to decide as to the different designs. No one else's favors will be equal to mine, — so beautifully executed, you know." Here she bestowed a dazzling glance upon the infatuated artist, who in his effort to keep down his wrath, and at the same time to appear tenderly cognizant of the glance, was fully occupied just then.

"What will you have?" he asked Sophy, laying aside his spoon with a show of interrupted work. "What is it now?"

Sophy laughed affectedly, merrily. "Do you think, Miss Griswold, that he ought to speak in that tone, as if I were *always* disturbing him? Could not you remonstrate with him?"

"I am sure you cannot expect me to scold him for anything to-day, Miss Verrick," answered Miss Griswold, with another glance at Erskine and the spoons.

Erskine's impatience cooled somewhat. He was undergoing alternate plunges into heat and cold, which, had he been of steel instead of flesh and blood, would have made him well-tempered for the remainder of his days. Now, it being time once more to plunge him into the furnace, Sophy leaned forward in her chair, the better to see the little landscape in its plebeian setting.

"Of course I know that it is troublesome to be disturbed while at work," she said, with a small, though pointed, emphasis on the last word. "Do you know I fully intend to do some painting on wood? Why did you not suggest it to me before, Mr. Erskine? I am sure that it must be improving, otherwise I should not find you about it. One needs every minute of light in every day which passes, — more especially now," she added, demurely, "when the hours of light are so short. But of course," she went on, unwilling to lengthen the strain upon Clifford's self-command, "of course you are expecting to hear the news all this time. You have both met my sister, I believe, and you both know Mr. Wynne? They are engaged. Interesting, is it not? I was so taken by surprise last evening that I was anxious to surprise some one in my turn, — a spirit of revenge, I am afraid. But now that I am revenged, I will go. I can see that you are properly affected, although you cannot find words to say so."

Miss Griswold, however, found plenty of words, and escorted them herself to the door, expatiating largely upon the text that one might have known how it would be with Mr. Wynne; that no one was safe, however entirely so he or she might seem.

Clifford made his exit with becoming stateliness; after which he cut four of the lightest, airiest, and most extended pigeon-wings possible to muscular grace; and as their conclusion found him far down the passage, he brought himself back by another assortment of pirouettes, and wafted himself in at Sophy's door, which he closed, laughing immoderately.

"You have taken it out of Erskine," he said; "you and he are square now. You do not owe him a single shot. 'Spoons!'" he exclaimed, imitating Sophy's recent tone and manner of vivacious surprise. "'How many? more than two?' Ah, ha-ha! Do not try to make me stop laughing; I must have it out now."

By and by, when partial seriousness was restored and they found themselves able to lunch without danger of obstructing their agitated wind-pipes, Clifford, in again referring to the engagement, chanced to remark that the Verrick house had been sold in good time. The innocent speech fell like a bomb in a placid lake.

"The house sold," Sophy exclaimed, in amazement, "and no one has told me? How did you hear of it? It cannot be true."

"Perhaps not," he agreed, rather alarmed; "it must have been a mistake, of course."

"I do not believe that it is a mistake. Who told you? How did you hear of it?"

"Do not you see," he argued, gently, "that if I have let a cat out of a bag, I must crowd it back again?"

"Your cat will not go back," said Sophy; "it is out to stay. I have seen it, so you may as well act as if it had never been in."

He closed his mouth firmly.

"Do you know who has bought it?" she persisted.

"Thank Heaven, I can answer that question! I have not an idea."

"Will you find out for me? Only tell me that; I will not ask anything more."

"Since I have been ass enough to tell you anything, I will try to find out that. But you will hear all about it soon. I have not known it three hours yet myself, and my hearing it at all was the merest accident. Only have patience, and you will know all about it."

After Clifford was gone, Sophy continued her task; but it was uphill work now. She blundered on, painting out that which she had achieved to her satisfaction during the morning. She was doubly dissatisfied with herself for this. How impossible she found it to put behind her those sentimentalities which she, having undertaken an absorbing life-work, ought to count as nothing! With Jessie married, there would be one less reason for her being bound by family tie to one residence rather than another. With the house sold there even was an added freedom. She had been happy and strong in the morning. How easy her work had grown beneath that conscious force! But now. Oh, home, home! She could hardly see for tears. And yet, since she was never again to need a home, why should she lament at its ceasing to be? What a poor, mean cause for discouragement was this, compared to those great afflictions which all strivers have endured since strife began! She dried her eyes hastily. She was beset by her own weaknesses, but she would conquer in the end.

As the hours were wearing out the light, Lanman knocked at the door of her studio. He had hardly been in her thoughts since the astounding announcement of her sister's engagement. At sight of him, however, as if over a bridge, her mind flew back to their interview of the afternoon before. He had

never entered her studio in his life ; and as she arose to greet him she felt a certainty that he had not now presented himself without a purpose.

"I am very glad to find you," he said, with a little anxious smile. "I hope that you are not so absorbed in your work as to be sorry that I have done so."

"It is of no consequence," she answered, throwing back her head and covering her eyes with her hands ; "I could not do any more."

"You are tired," he said, in a peculiar voice, "are you not?"

She raised her head and uncovered her eyes to look at him. He was gazing steadily at her. Before she could answer him he spoke again, still in the same strange, quiet voice.

"Should you like," he asked, "to give up your studio here and go abroad to study?"

The question was one which might have been answered as unhesitatingly and joyfully as any that ever was asked ; but the manner made her hesitate.

"You could do as you chose then," he pursued ; "you could learn much by observation, and by it and such practice as you wished you could easily advance as rapidly as you are able to do here, where it must so often be distasteful to you."

She tried to laugh. "And have you found me another teacher," she asked, "with all these modern improvements?"

He leaned forward and rested a firm hand upon her arm. "My dear," he said, simply, "I want you to marry me."

She was conscious now of a dim sense of surprise

at the knowledge that she had been aware of this inevitable situation since he had entered the room,—aware of it away down deep in her soul, although upon the surface of her mind it had not made itself felt. Without speaking, she looked down at her fingers, which lay together in her lap. His hand, which rested upon her arm, now slid down upon them and covered them.

“I have chosen my life,” she said at last; “it is here.”

“Which means that you care nothing for me! I was sure that it was so, and yet I am also sure that it might become different in time,—I know your tastes so well; I should be able to gratify so many of them. It would be most unnatural if, being to you as I should be, I could not win your affection.”

“You are deceived in me,” she answered, drawing back from him; “I am not worth the effort.”

“Let me decide as to that,” he returned. “There is but one thing which could place you beyond me,—your preference for some one else.”

Sophy’s cheeks grew scarlet. “There has never been any one for whom I have cared particularly in all my life,” she said.

She had risen, and was standing at the window now, with her forehead pressed against the icy glass.

“If you would try to trust me,” he said, earnestly, following her to where she stood, “you would find then how great my love for you is.”

It was the first time she had ever heard the word so used. To him also it was evidently strange, and came with a certain embarrassment from his lips. Still, he did not hesitate.

"There is nothing which would render me less your friend, less your true and devoted lover, than I am now," he continued; "and when two people are such honest, congenial friends as we may be, — as we shall be, if you are willing, — there is no affection too deep for them to know. You are so young," he pursued, finding still that she gave no sign, "and you may be so much alone in the future; I cannot bear to think of it."

He turned from her with a despairing gesture. Evidently he had given up hope of a favorable reply. He spoke on, that he might have his say, that he might not thereafter reproach himself with the thought of an unspoken argument.

If he could have known how his earnest concern for her touched her heart! But her future! There was no room for matrimony in her great ambition. If only he would be satisfied with the friendship which he had once desired, that friendship for which she had come to long as earnestly as he could have wished. But marriage was such a great and terrible step. How cold and unloving he seemed as he stood there! If he would only argue with her and combat her doubts!

"You would not be happy married," she said, facing his now distant figure, "you are so independent. How could you be willing to bind yourself?"

"Do not let us discuss my mistaken preference," he returned, dryly. "Mistaken though it be, it is only preference which has brought me to you here. And can you believe that I have not given the matter thought? It has not been from my mind, in one form or another, since I first realized my affection for you, and that was before you came to your brother

at Mr. Wynne's. Since then I have purposely seen you seldom. The sentiment which I felt for you has had every opportunity of dying. Had it been but fancy, it would have passed away."

She smiled forlornly. "If you wished to cure yourself of an affection for me," she said, "you should have been often with me. You took the wrong course."

His brow clouded. "Do not speak so," he cried, almost sharply. "Why should you entertain so poor an opinion of yourself?"

He had not noticed how near she had been to weakness. He was paying her the compliment of believing that in her intimated refusal of his offer at the outset she had been acting upon unalterable convictions. She gathered all her pride about her, that he might believe the more confidently in her determination.

"Listen to me," she said, with sudden resolution. "I have, with a great deal of talk and nonsense, undertaken to make a career for myself. Now, how would it seem if I were to give up the attempt after an enduring struggle of four months? I heard once of a carpenter's apprentice who worked for three days, and then retired worsted, because he said that he knew he never could learn the business."

Lanman drew himself up. "I have your answer, then," he said, scorning further argument; "it is no."

"You have it," she answered, hardening her heart the more because of the regret which possessed it; "it is no." She dared not employ a gentler manner of conveying her decision.

"Perhaps I should have mentioned," he said, stiffly, "that I have your brother's sanction in speak-

ing to you as I have done. There were reasons which made it best that I should speak to him. I saw him this morning."

Her heart sank within her. "Why need you have told any one?" she asked, visions of further painful argument presenting themselves. "Why could you not have let it rest between us?"

"There were reasons," he repeated, flushing, "which made it best. I will say good-bye to you now. It may be that we shall be obliged to meet sometimes; we may at least be good friends, may we not?"

"It is not likely that we shall meet at all," she said, ignoring the question; "I go nowhere. My aunt's house and this room are the only places which you need avoid."

Something within her was holding her back from such unkindness; but she rushed wilfully on. As she concluded, he waited for no further words, but bowed a cold farewell and left her alone.

Sophy had no appetite for her dinner that evening, and retired to her room immediately upon the conclusion of the meal. Early in the evening Walter was announced to her. When she descended she found him alone in the library.

"I have a piece of news for you," he exclaimed, kissing her.

"Have you?" she returned, trying to smile. "Perhaps it will not prove so entirely new to me as you think; I believe that I could guess it if I tried."

"Try, then," he said, laughing happily.

"The house is sold," she suggested.

He nodded. "You had heard it? I am not surprised. It only happened this morning. I am so

glad that it went as it did! He does not want possession until spring, and it will not be necessary to disturb Jessie before she is ready to go. But of course he told you everything."

"I know nothing beyond the fact that the house is sold."

"What! How could he tell you that without telling you who bought it?"

"The person who told me that it was sold did not know who had bought it."

A puzzled frown appeared upon his face. "I do not understand, then," he said; "I supposed that Mr. Lanman had told you,—and he certainly knows the name of the purchaser, since it was he himself."

"Mr. Lanman!" she exclaimed, recoiling; "I never dreamed of such a thing! He did not speak of it."

"You have seen him, then?"

"He called upon me this afternoon at the studio."

"I knew that he intended doing so. And have you nothing to tell me?"

She shook her head. "Nothing," she answered, sadly, her eyes filling with tears. "Oh! why do you care so much? What difference does it make about me? I wish—I do wish that you could get used to the idea of my being not worth caring about, and let me go on in my own way. Every one who has anything to do with me is either angry or unhappy."

"That, my dear little sister," he said, very positively, "is because you are very headstrong and very selfish."

"But other people surely have faults?"

"Yours are the kind of faults which are certain to affect those who take a deep interest in you."

He spoke with an effort. Unpleasant as he found the task of explanation, he would have her know the causes of her position.

"I am as I was made," she answered, shortly; "some people are born humpbacked."

"You were not made; you are making yourself."

"And you think that I am doing it badly? Suggest an improvement. What should I have to do to make myself right?"

"In the first place you would give up wearing your nerves to pieces by overworking yourself to learn an accomplishment which, although it is well enough in itself and in moderation, is nothing but an injury at the pace at which you are putting it now. You should live at home as any other young lady would do, expecting and enjoying a quietly happy life, instead of insisting upon undergoing all kinds of unnecessary ups and downs in the hope of adventure."

She stopped him there. "Do not go on," she said, coldly. "I have an ambition which you cannot understand. We shall never agree, and I am tired — not on account of any work that I have done," she added, hastily. "If you only knew how much more *people* tire me than *work*!"

And then, with a few further hopeless advices and injunctions, he kissed her once more, in a dispirited manner, and left her to herself.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AUNT SOPHRONIA'S displeasure at Sophy's shortcomings was tempered with none of that patient forbearance which characterized Walter's milder expressions of disapproval. Mrs. Hurlingham's self-value was impaired to the verge of extinction whenever she reviewed the successful resistances of her charge against the well-matured plans which she had so confidently formed for the benefit of that obstinate young woman. Once, twice, three times within the week had she and Sophy encountered each other in striking differences of opinion, the last the most enduring in its results; for Mr. Begbie, upon being asked to dine, had regretted a previous engagement and remained away, — which Mrs. Hurlingham attributed directly to the memory of Sophy's former rudeness. Argue as she might in her own defence upon the possibility of the gentleman's excuse being truth, Sophy's suggestions met with such utter incredulity that she surrendered the attempt, and allowed the subject to rest upon the irritating ground that since her aunt did not care personally for the gentleman's company, and she herself would not have it upon any terms, there was nothing lost, even should he always decline to favor them. And hereupon there took place a battle of unusual fierceness, which ended in Sophy's expressed

determination to lodge elsewhere, — an undesirable arrangement, which was only prevented by Walter's interference; and after a series of skirmishes affairs settled down to a condition of apparent neutrality which it required all the force of Mrs. Hurlingham's little-used self-control to maintain.

Walter still came to see his sister with dutiful regularity; but his calls were brief and general, and conversation dwelt upon no more debatable points than home news and the coming event of Jessie's wedding. There were times when Sophy could not but acknowledge to herself that she was heartily tired of it all; but of this she gave no outward sign. Then would come one of those rapid strides in improvement which frequently reward a well-contested period of apparent standstill, whereat she persuaded herself of her sufficient happiness, and lived on alone.

And so time passed. Days came and went, and among them the feast of Christmas, — as like to an ordinary day with Sophy as she could force it to be. She made a few little gifts to Jessie and her brothers, to Mr. and Mrs. Hurlingham and to Clifford, and received in return remembrances from them. She would have been glad, had she found it possible, to consider Mr. Erskine also; but he had become so distant in his conduct toward her that she was relieved when he quietly absented himself as the season of festivity drew near, not to reappear until a week had passed.

Early in the year Miss Griswold's portrait was finished, and delivered over to the suffrages of the public. Artists raved about it; those who wished to be or to seem in sympathy with the newer lights,

followed their example. But there was a faction which argued that a picture was best which represented its subject from all distances; and that a representation which, seen within the radius of any room of ordinary size, appeared only like so many smears of opposed tint and color, was no representation at all. This faction, however, being composed largely of the ignorant, albeit the honest, received little attention and carried no weight. The picture therefore might be regarded as an unqualified success, with only enough of controversy as to its merit to advertise it well. The wise ones were charmed, the artist satisfied, and the model herself dazzled and delighted by the prominent position in which it placed her.

As days continued to pass, Sophy could not but notice the increased sulkiness of Erskine. For a time this was quite incomprehensible to her, even though she had imagined herself prepared for any degree of eccentricity on his part. But finally the cause of it was disclosed to her at a flash with the announcement of Miss Griswold's engagement, the bridegroom elect being a young man of dazzling prospects if of uncertain present possessions, the heir after his father to great wealth, and the representative of a name which was known even at the most extreme social altitude.

"The joke of it is," Clifford explained to Sophy, "that she met him first at that german, — the spoon-german, you know. She did indeed, — I was there; and then after he had met her, his attention was attracted and fastened by the talk of her portrait. Ha ha! should not you like to present old Erskine with a tract on the folly of wasting his time?"

"Do not be so heartless," Sophy reproved him, laughing, yet shocked; "I hardly dare to think of it. What a colossal flirt she must be! Do you know I had almost persuaded myself to think that she liked him,—was in love with him, you know! I could not exactly see how she managed it; but I was willing to believe that he had a more attractive side to his character than he was ever willing to display for my benefit, and I thought it had fascinated her. Truly, I did."

"Small blame to you," returned Clifford. "I should have thought so myself if I had not seen her before. I would be the death of any girl who treated me like that."

Sophy looked in undisguised satisfaction at the radiant young face before her, with its dimple of a frown.

"You would like to reserve the privilege of withdrawal for yourself, I suppose," she suggested, severely, with a view to checking undue conceit.

"I should like nothing of the kind," he answered, with some warmth; "it is a mean business either way. As for the adversary, I do not exactly object to seeing him hard hit; he is such a savage, it may do him good."

"Poor man!" she said, sighing.

"What do you mean by displaying such an angelic disposition?" he laughed, reproachfully. "I have always prided myself upon my amiability, but I could not begin with that."

"I do not object to him," she said. "He does not like me, and he is so honest about it."

"I am sure I cannot see why either of those facts should endear him to you; I should think one about

as disagreeable as the other. But your tastes are vitiated ; I think that you are growing old, or something. Aha ! I have you there ! You may deny that you are growing old, but you cannot deny that you are something." .

A few days later, when the subject of the above conversation had instructed and criticised his pupil for the day, he postponed his usual prompt exit from her presence and entered upon other subjects. She had been in the daily hope, since the date of Jessie's wedding had been settled, of securing an opportunity for telling him of it, and announcing the necessity for her own departure and probable fortnight's absence ; but such opportunities as had offered were so slight that she had hardly mastered her usual manner sufficiently to speak before the moment had gone.

To-day his expressionless face was tinged with a drab palor, and his light-lashed lids looked heavy and dark. His whole figure had about it a neglected, uncared-for, drooping appearance. So this suffering was the effect of love. With a light shudder she half realized what that heart-break might be.

" I have within the last week," Erskine was saying, in his usual unemotional tone, " come to a decision of which I think it best that you should know. I am making arrangements to go abroad in the spring, and I expect to remain away for some time, — permanently, it may be. Therefore I tell you at once, that you may make other arrangements for yourself."

A variety of sentiments rushed through Sophy's mind, — relief, triumph in not having been the first to cry the bargain off, intense disappointment, and sorrow for her late tyrant.

"I know of no one here to whom I should care to recommend you," he went on, — "no one who could follow exactly the course which would be best for you."

"Do you think that I have improved with you sufficiently to make it worth while for me to continue to study?" she asked him. She almost shrank from the bald directness of the question; but he only shrugged his shoulders indifferently.

"Under the circumstances," he answered, coldly, "no."

"You do not think, then," she persisted, fidgeting uneasily with her handkerchief, "that I am worth cultivating after all?"

"You would need a great deal of cultivation, certainly. I do not feel that you have ever given your best effort to it yet. You have an intelligence and perception which are unusual, but you have no persistence; you will not work."

She thought of the long weeks of effort almost without interruption, of the aching brain and fingers with which she had closed her days so many times, of her resisted temptations and increasing isolation. All these were as nothing to him, then!

"I have improved," she suggested, in self-defence; "I can see that I have improved."

"Well," he returned, "what then? So have the pupils at the Institute improved. I expected more of you than that."

"And yet you are sure that the ability is there if it could have the proper amount of cultivation?"

"As you put the question, yes. But it would be very nearly impossible to secure the proper amount of cultivation. It would be necessary for you to give

your entire life up to it; to live near me and be constantly under my instruction, and away from the interference of friends who hold you back."

This speech, the longest she had ever heard from his lips, aroused some of her earlier enthusiasm within her. The goal of her ambition seemed to move nearer to her impatient feet, as in the pure air the distant hills seem but a summer stroll away, and the troubles and toils of the interval as nothing to consider. Still, his remark as to her friends grated upon her.

"And have you no friends?" she asked him, daringly.

"None," he answered. "Those whom I know are the friends of my work, not of myself. That is as it should be if one has real ambition."

"Indeed, I have ambition; but if I were to go abroad, as you think best for my profession, everything else in the world would have gone by for me, would it not? I should be like you?"

The words and inference were hardly flattering; but the manner was only earnest, nothing more. His sharp, axe-to-grindstone spirit seemed to suit her mood. She could ask questions of sufficient directness now. All fear was forgotten in her anxiety to learn what his answers might be.

"You would become my pupil by your own choice," he said, slowly. "After you had chosen, you would have neither time nor inclination to change."

"Are you anxious that I should make the attempt?" she asked, in surprise. "Can it be possible that you care?"

"Understand me," he returned: "I care for no *person* under the sun; for your success in art I

should care, as it would be the only project which, in my hands, has not become utterly hopeless."

He spoke in dull, dispirited tones, with a heavy gaze before him, as one who views a sunless future.

She shivered slightly, and her enthusiasm died within her. "They would not allow me," she said. "It was a great concession to let me come here to study. But to go abroad, friendless and alone, they would never listen to it for a minute; they would shut me up in prison first."

He arose without looking at her, and moved toward the door. "As long as you value their opinion more than your own success," he said, "it would be useless for you to consider the subject. I believe I told you that it would be useless."

He had reached the door as he finished speaking; and then with no more notice at leaving her than he would have bestowed upon any other worthless material, he was gone.

Sophy walked home alone, her brain still busy with the result of this singular interview. The power of fame and fortune seemed now, perhaps, so near and so possible, — now so far away, with its intervening years upon years of loveless, uncheerful work.

It was a cold twilight, with a light dry snow-fall sliding here and there before the wind, and drifting across the sloping roof-tops in long, surf-like waves. It was a night in which to appreciate a home.

As was usual with her, the long walk rested and revived her, and she was able to appear at dinner sufficiently in her own spirits to escape remark. All was progressing satisfactorily when Mr. Hurlingham said, "I learned to-day who had bought your old home, Sophy."

Sophy looked steadily into her plate. "Yes?" she said, interrogatively, feeling the necessity for some reply.

"Who do you think it was?" he went on, pausing, with his napkin half way to his lips, to regard her.

Sophy murmured something which might pass for the expected statement that she did not know.

"It is an open secret now," Mr. Hurlingham continued; "it was bought by Mr. Lanman."

Sophy looked guilty. Mrs. Hurlingham preserved an ominous silence.

"Of course," said Sophy, holding her head well up, and trying to execute a natural smile, "of course he will pay promptly; that is the main thing. We might have been cheated by some people, might we not? But he —" A glance at her aunt's face checked her senseless, hurried words. Mrs. Hurlingham changed the subject presently, and Sophy occupied the remainder of the meal in silent reflection. As plainly as if she had been blessed with the gift of prophecy she could foresee that her aunt would investigate the subject further. Why had she not better feigned surprise? Nothing was lost upon Aunt Sophronia.

In the course of the conversation it appeared that Mr. Hurlingham was pledged to an engagement which would necessitate his leaving his accustomed chair and paper to absent himself from his domestic fireside for the evening. Upon learning that he was to drive to his place of destination across the city, Sophy eagerly offered to accompany him, thinking, perhaps, thus to avoid an interview with his wife.

Mrs. Hurlingham, however, interposed. "Stevens will go, of course; there will not be room for three," she said.

"Why cannot I drive? I am not afraid."

"At that hour of the night! You would look well! Besides, you cannot drive; no woman can drive a horse except where he wants to go."

Mr. Hurlingham raised his eyebrows very high, and laughed. "Your aunt always wants her own way," he said, shabbily taking refuge behind her spoken decision, and ignoring his own mental preference.

His wife smiled. "Whose way should you expect me to want?" she asked.

"Although I did know a young lady once who understood how to drive," Mr. Hurlingham said, soothingly, to Sophy. "She was young too, — not more than twenty. It was quite surprising."

"It is very surprising to know a young lady of that age who understands anything at all," Aunt Sophronia answered, smartly. And Sophy knew that there was to be no reprieve.

So convinced was she of the hopelessness of evasion that she made no further effort to escape, but after the dinner was over, waited quietly in the library while Mr. Hurlingham made ready to encounter the chilly elements without. No sooner was the door fairly closed upon him than her aunt entered the room and spoke bravely forth.

"I should like to have you tell me," she began, in her most determined voice and manner, "where, and how often, you are accustomed to see Mr. Lanman? You need not trouble yourself to look insulted or to ask me what reason I have for supposing; I know what I am talking about."

"Then you know more than I do," Sophy managed to answer, with spirit; but she knew that she trembled with a kind of vague fear, that her cheeks were burning red, and that her eyes would not raise themselves to look her interrogator in the face.

"Do you mean to tell me that you did not know before to-night who had bought the house? It was kept such a profound secret from us all, Heaven knows why! and was to be such a surprise! Was it a surprise to you to-night? Answer me. No, you need not, for I know without. What you shall tell me is this: whether you are in the habit of receiving callers at your studio?"

"I am not in the habit of it especially, but it happens sometimes."

"And why, pray? Is not this house sufficient even for Mr. Lanman?"

The sneering manner in which the name was spoken aroused such a lively wrath within Sophy's soul that the very strength of the sentiment was its cure. What was he to her that it should be so? Oh, above all things in the world she must successfully hide *that!*

"Mr. Lanman has only been in my studio once in his life," she said, quickly and triumphantly. But her triumph was premature.

"For what did he come that time?" was the next question, as quickly put.

"Only on an errand."

"What was the errand?"

"That was his business."

"You will not tell? Very well, then; I shall ask him."

"What?"

"I shall most certainly ask him. Do you suppose I shall allow such a proceeding on his part to come to my knowledge without taking proper notice of it? He is not in the city at present, I happen to have heard; but when he is, I propose to have an interview with him."

It is not always a long step from despair to hope; but when too abrupt, the transition is trying. In spite of her relief, Sophy was near to tears.

"I will tell you just two things, Aunt Sophronia," she said; "if we talk forever, I shall not tell any more. Mr. Lanman has been at my studio just one time, and the person who told me about the house was Walter. That is all that I have to say."

Mrs. Hurlingham walked about the room in angry agitation too deep for present words, while her niece, seated upon one of the straight, leather-covered chairs, gazed dismally into the fire. There was no sound save the crackling of the logs, the frivolous ticking of the French clock, and the swish of agitated silken skirts.

"You have no regard whatever for my wishes," Mrs. Hurlingham remarked, after some minutes, seating herself with judicial dignity opposite her niece; "and such a one I do not desire as a member of my family."

Sophy turned her eyes from the fire to her aunt's face. "If you remember, Aunt Sophronia," she said, loftily, "I warned you that I should not be a remunerative visitor."

"You certainly did not give me the impression that you intended acting as you have been doing."

"What have I been doing? I have done nothing but attend to my own affairs."

"No one would deny that you consider yourself exhaustively in everything. But you have no principle; simply you have none," and Mrs. Hurlingham nodded emphatically at her insulted niece.

Sophy arose at once. "I shall leave your house to-night," she said, moving rapidly to the door; "I shall go at once."

"One moment, please," cried her aunt, from the sofa. "Where are you going?"

"That is my affair."

"It is also mine. You cannot leave to-night; in the morning you may do as you see fit."

Sophy proceeded disdainfully in her exit from the room. Mrs. Hurlingham arose and overtook her.

"Do you wish me to alarm the servants?" she asked, in a low voice, which trembled with excited wrath. "Do you wish to engage in a hand-to-hand conflict with Williams? I tell you that you cannot leave my house to go into the street, and there is no other place where you can go to-night."

Sophy twisted her arm from her aunt's grasp. "I am not afraid of the servants," she said, contemptuously. "I am going to my brother."

"Walter is out of town."

She turned at this. "What do you mean?" she said, quickly. "He was in town yesterday."

For answer, her aunt took from the table a small note, which she carefully replaced where it had lain.

"He came here to-day to speak with you. He has been called away on business, and as you were not yet come, he left that for you. I had forgotten it until now."

Sophy caught up the unenclosed fragment and opened it. It only substantiated her aunt's statement, with the additional information that the writer would return in a few days. It was an unloving little scrawl, written briefly and in haste. Having read it, Sophy realized her utter helplessness.

"You need not alarm Williams," she said, with a bitter little laugh; "I shall favor you until to-morrow, after all. It is too bad, is it not? You will never know who is the better man, Williams or I."

Once in her room she gave way to the most dismal reflections. What dreadful quality was in her, she wondered, that nobody would stay her friend. In unreasonable loneliness she even blamed Walter for his absence. Come what might, she was spending her last night under her aunt's roof; neither, she was resolved, should an ignominious homeward retreat be the end of her efforts. What was there for her to do? As she thought, the memory of her conversation with Erskine came back to her. She could still decide to go abroad and remain under his instruction. The idea of so important a move staggered her resolution; her mind turned baffled from the stern necessity of so serious a decision. "To-morrow," she thought, "to-morrow I will talk with him again. He shall tell me what to do, and I will do it."

CHAPTER XIX.

WITH the morning light, although light of the grayest, dreariest description, a more rational spirit took possession of Sophy. She saw in calmer moments how impossible it would be that she should win the consent of her family to the plan which had been suggested by Erskine, and she could not bring herself to defy them openly, or to leave like a runaway without their knowledge.

She breakfasted alone, purposely deferring her appearance below stairs until after Mr. Hurlingham had taken his departure, and leaving the house while she was still secure from the possibility of a second encounter with her aunt.

She worked steadily at the Institute during the morning, and after a solitary luncheon started to find for herself a habitation. Here, then, was that perfect independence for which she had sighed ! But where in the reality was the excitement which had always in anticipation caused her heart to beat so quickly ? She seemed to have absolutely no feeling on the point.

Clifford, who appeared at the studio as she was about starting forth, begged to accompany her upon her mission ; but this she would not grant. He might walk with her, if he would, to the door of

Walter's lodging, where she intended making inquiries, but after that she must be alone.

Clifford's entire freedom from questioning curiosity made him a friend well worth having to one in Sophy's position. Although he chattered like a magpie over her smaller affairs, that which she chose to tell him of her home difficulties he received without comment, never appearing in the least surprised by her confidences, and never afterward referring to them. He showed no lack of interest, but he seemed to understand with great nicety the point at which interest would end and intrusion begin.

So this morning, although he must have known well that only the most unusual circumstances could have brought about such a change in Sophy's way of living, he accepted the situation without remark. There was comfort in this. A little of the delight of her coming freedom was with her after all.

"You had better wait for me here," she said, answering his proposal to accompany her. "Be a good boy; and if you leave before I come back, lock the door and put the key under the mat."

"Oh, I shall not go," he said, laughing, and showing her his novel. "I have just discovered that my heroine is 'the daughter of the proudest earl that ever trod ancestral acres.' Do you think that I could turn my back on such lofty society as that? Still, you need not be afraid of interrupting me, and stay away on purpose. I will excuse myself to 'er' ighness when you come."

"Goodness, what trash you can read!" she commented, looking over his shoulder while she tied her fur about her neck.

"Don't say a word," he returned, abstracting a

box of chocolate from the pocket of his coat. "I am going in training directly, mentally and physically. In the mean time, adoo!"

Sophy would gladly have engaged a room with Walter's landlady: but that busy dame represented her establishment as "full a'ready."

"I know a place where you 're likely to get in," she said, reflecting, with her head on one side. "Of course I don't know exactly how the house will be kep' up; but it has splendid big rooms. The lady has just gone there. I will give you the address, if you like, and if she asks a reference, you can offer your brother, and it'll do; I'll see to that. He is a splendid young gentleman, and you look like him too."

Sophy was grateful for the offer and the compliment, and lost no time in ascertaining the locality of this possible abode and the necessary directions for reaching it.

"It's three streets down there, and turn to your left. See? Then on the far side, in about the middle, there's a big stone house, — 136 is the number; you can't miss it. I know you can get something there."

Number 136 proved to be a four-story stone house with a large double door, — rather a fine building in itself, but slightly inclined toward a *passé* appearance, as were the other houses in the row. Still, the windows of 136 were cleaner and more shining than those of its fellows, its shades and its door-mat were newer, and it presented a more attractive appearance generally.

The door was opened for her by a small colored girl, who smiled so persistently and so broadly that Sophy's attention was attracted.

"Why, it is Mary Lizzie!" she exclaimed.

The child chuckled, and showed the way within. There was the blunt little woolly pigtail standing horizontally forth from the back of her bobbing head. To-day it was ornamented with a little scarlet bow, like a butterfly perched upon a twig. It was certainly Mary Lizzie.

Sophy for a minute almost forgot her errand. "Do you live here?" she asked.

"Yes'm, I tend to the door. Mer mother she cooks downstairs for the lady."

Thus reminded, Sophy inquired for Mrs. Buxton, and Mary Lizzie departed.

The parlor was a very barn of a room, with a carpet of a vast and scattering pattern, and bare painted walls ornamented with an occasional portrait of astonishing execution, which seemed to be stranded in the vast expanse of background. There were also by way of adornment a funeral wreath preserved in wax, and a basket of fruit of transcendent fairness and falsity.

Mrs. Buxton was delighted with the prospect of a new lodger. If her face had been less kind, or the room which she showed even colder and more vacant, Sophy would not have cared to look farther. She knew nothing of lodgings; there might be none better which she could afford. And then Mrs. Buxton was willing to arrange about sending for her trunk, which was an inestimable convenience.

So, after a few further preliminaries, Sophy found herself the proprietor of a freezing apartment on the second floor containing conspicuously a turn-up bedstead and a good-sized marble-topped table like a skating pond. The only superfluous articles, and

these seemed superfluous indeed, were a pair of palm-leaf fans, one of which had been thrust into the window-sash to keep it from rattling.

"It'll look very different when you come back," said Mrs. Buxton, cheerfully. "There's a easy-chair goes in here, and you'll have a fire. It'll look real splendid."

"Yes, thank you," returned Sophy, making haste to leave the room, lest its present aspect and temperature should prove too discouraging. "If you will be good enough to send immediately for the trunk, I will go back to my studio. At what time do you dine?"

"At six o'clock. Might you be an artist?"

"Yes," returned Sophy, quietly proud, "I am."

"Oh! I had a cousin that was a beautiful artist," said Mrs. Buxton, confidentially. "I wish you could 'a' known him; but he's dead now."

As Sophy was about to depart, after receiving many other confidences, it occurred to her to inquire about Mary Lizzie.

"Have you a good cook?" she asked, with a view to leading toward the subject.

"Well," answered Mrs. Buxton, frowning dubiously, "that's according to how you take her. She is a good, faithful woman, and as neat and honest as can be. I sometimes think she'd cook better if she had more time. There is n't any one to help me, only her and her little girl; so we're always in a hurry, and that's a fact. Still, she does pretty well with the table. Sometimes she hardly makes any mistakes for ever so long."

"And her little girl? She is a bright little creature, is she not? She looks as if she were."

"Mary Lizzie? She's the greatest child I ever saw in my life. She can cook as well as her mother to-day, and she's as quick — Well, I don't know what she can't do in an hour. At first I didn't want to take the mother because of the child; but since then I've often thought I could spare her easier'n Mary Lizzie."

Sophy found Clifford awaiting her at the studio not so absorbed in his book but that he was ready to put it aside and enjoy her news.

"Did you find anything?" he asked.

"Yes; and not so very far away. The woman will take me for two meals if I wish, although the rest of the people only have dinner. I told her that I simply could not go flying about to find breakfast; so she said that rather than lose me, she would send it to my room mornings."

"Who is there in the house besides you?"

"There is a school teacher and a music teacher for the feminine element, and a young doctor and one or two other things for the masculine. Of course I did not see any of them; but I shall to-night. This Mrs. Buxton who has the house is quite poor now, although she has been rich. Her husband is dead, and she has four boys to bring up, the oldest only fourteen. Of course it is easier than if they were girls; but I was sorry for her. She seemed so good-natured, in spite of her worries, with her dress all full of pins, that I made up my mind I would not leave her."

"When I see a landlady with her dress full of pins," said Clifford, positively, "I always make up my mind that I will leave her as soon as possible. She is sure to be always too busy to attend to her house. It would not do for me."

"Of course it would not do for you, but it will do very well for me. Perhaps I may be able to do her a service some day ; I shall like that."

Clifford reflected. "How was the hall, — soupy?" he asked at length. "I never knew a place where the housekeeper was worried that the halls were not soupy."

Sophy reluctantly admitted that she had noticed a slight odor of cooking ; whereat he was triumphant.

"And the music teacher will practise," he said, reading the future positively, after this confirmation of his surmises regarding the past. "It is fortunate that you are fond of music. But your room, — how was your room?"

"Cold," she answered, briefly, "and big. One would want an arctic outfit to explore it. I did not stay long. It has been unoccupied ; that makes all the difference, of course. I shall have a fire to-night." Then, laughing, she told him of the table and the fans.

"Cæsar, what a paradise !" was his remark. "Oh, you will never be able to stand it, you know," he added, after he had enjoyed his laugh. "A place like that is no joke. I have known fellows who have tried it, and I know what it is ; all your clothes like sheet tin, and the hot water *frappé* before you are ready to use it. It would be the death of you in no time."

But Sophy hardly heard him. "Why, I had almost forgotten," she said. "I met a friend of yours there, — a young lady."

"Oh, come, now !" he laughed ; "break it to me gently. Who is she? A letter at a time, please."

"No, I shall tell you all at once; so nerve yourself to bear it. It was Mary Lizzie."

"What, the wandering minstrel? My own, my long lost?"

"The same! We shall have that picture yet."

As Sophy became more accustomed to her abiding place, she discovered disadvantages connected with it which, had she been more dependent upon it as a home, would have proved almost unbearable. She was obliged to abandon the idea of rendering her room in the least cheerfully habitable by leaving a few books and ornaments about, for she found that, owing to the inquisitive dispositions of her friends the boys, her ornaments were broken and her books abstracted altogether. Wherefore the room contained only the locked trunk and pair of fans, with which no one cared to interfere. Then, too, the fare was of a very indifferent quality. Mrs. Buxton was always overwhelming in her apologies for this, but the fact remained, and Sophy still pitied her too much to rebel.

Mrs. Buxton was a stout woman, who hurried through her days in the eternal hope of getting even with the duties which rolled in tantalizing view before her,—an accumulating and elusive mass not to be overtaken. Toward Sophy she expressed great gratitude for her kindness to the boys and for her silence while others were complaining. Indeed, so entirely did she seem to appreciate this consideration that Sophy felt bound to continue it.

Walter came to see her at once upon his return to the city. He made no comment upon her change of residence, nor did he insist upon her return. "Mrs. Mason has told me about the place," he said, almost

formally, "and she says that the people are kind and quiet; so perhaps it is as well, after all, that you did not try to remain with Aunt Sophronia."

"Were you very angry with me?" she asked, wistfully.

He did not answer her question as promptly as she might have wished, nor did he look at her in replying.

"I should like it if things could be different," he said, guardedly; "but I will never insist upon anything merely on account of my own preference. We need not go over that again, I think."

He showed that he was unhappy. Well, what mattered unhappiness? She was more wretched than he a thousand times, and she could bear it, and toil and struggle and starve and freeze with never a soul to care.

"I should like to talk with you a little about your accounts," he said. "Will you let me see your book?"

"Oh, Walter!" she answered, impatiently, "I cannot bother with that book! What is the use in it? *You* know how much money you have given me, and *I* know that it is all spent. So we balance exactly."

Poor methodical Walter was in despair.

"You might do this for me without injuring your future prospects," he said, goaded into something like a sneer; and Sophy, already remorseful, was easily brought to promise reform.

But there was little pleasure in their intercourse; and as the weeks went by, his visits, although dutifully frequent, became shorter and shorter.

Erschine too seemed more severe than ever, more

silent, more neglectful. Were it not for Clifford's bright presence, Sophy would have been badly off indeed.

"I am as hungry as a bear," she said to him one stormy noon, as he made his appearance in the studio with his ulster-pockets bulging with parcels. "We did not have anything for breakfast but picked-up fish."

"Picked up where?" he inquired, suggestively.

"Don't ask me," she answered, laughing. "If it were not for you, I should starve; you are like one of the ravens that fed the prophet. Although a blond raven," she added, looking at his fair head, "is something unusual."

"Oh, not at all! You have heard of a white blackbird,—it is the same thing. I am as much like a raven as you are like a prophet. Come, now, the banquet is prepared. Those macaroons are so delightfully fresh that they are like glue. Do not take one until you have told me the news. What is the latest from the 'residenz.'"

"Nothing especial. Mrs. Buxton speaks of Doré as 'Mr. Door;' that is the last."

"How is the young doctor?"

"Blooming! The only true practitioner now in existence,—in fact the only one who ever has existed; as people knew positively nothing of medicine until within the last twenty-five years! I really wish that you could meet him. I do not think that I ever saw less hair about any one's face; and it is so smooth that it looks as if it were sketched on his forehead with pen and ink. I want to offer to draw him in some more; it would be an improvement. Our other man is a 'widow-gentleman,' Charley

Buxton tells me,—a clerk in a bank. He has nothing to say. He and I are the audience. Mrs. Buxton figures as a reduced millionnaire who has been accustomed to clover. I want to suggest to her that even I have been accustomed to a little more of it than she favors me with. I wish you could have seen the rolls we had this morning. That cook can take an ounce of flour and make it weigh a pound."

"Invaluable in a famine," suggested Clifford, parenthetically.

"And if you only could see," went on Sophy, "with nothing to eat, how elegant we are! Such refinement of coughs to fill in pauses, such curly little fingers! Miss Gibbs and Miss Farley are distantly related to every celebrity in the country. I am quite ashamed of my low condition, I can assure you."

"Oh! you must ask me to dinner some night," laughed her companion; "you must indeed,—I want to see the collection."

"I would not do it for the world," she answered. "Do you think I want you to choke to death?"

"If you do not, I will go there to board,—I have as good a right as you, and Uncle Lan would not object—for a while."

Sophy at this became more than serious.

"You will not think of it, will you?" she urged, anxiously.

"Yes, I shall; you have said enough. Take a macaroon."

"If you dare to do it, Clifford Lanman," she cried, wrathfully, not heeding his last words, "I will leave the house, and you shall never enter my studio

again. Oh, Clifford, *dear*, please do not think of it, will you?"

Clifford was instantly overcome by emotion. "I am not proof against this burst of affection," he said, with stage tears; "it shall be as you will."

One day, it being Sophy's turn to select a model at the Institute, she resolved upon requesting that Mary Lizzie might be allowed to serve.

Mary Lizzie's mamma was summoned from the lower regions, whence she appeared, smiling radiantly. Perhaps she had never been so proud of her offspring in her life.

"I wanted to ask you to let Mary Lizzie come to a studio, to have her picture painted," said Sophy, pleasantly. "Could you get along without her during the mornings of this week? She shall be well paid."

Mary Lizzie's mamma smiled still more broadly, and delivered herself of this extraordinary reply.

"I don't see how yo' come to want the chile," she said; "but of co'se yo' can have the majority to please yo' confidence."

This graceful response subsequently became Clifford's favorite formula of concession.

CHAPTER XX.

WITH the lengthening days the cold weather had duly intensified. Following the beginning of Sophy's residence at Mrs. Buxton's, there had come a month of gray skies and snow-squalls, now to be succeeded by a similar period of fog and damp, muddy thaw.

Mary Lizzie's portrait by the Institute pupils was finished, but in Sophy's case it proved a very questionable success. There were tears in her eyes as she looked at her completed work and remembered how different had been her first anticipation of it. What should she do? She could not learn. Indeed, her mode of life, with its insufficient, irregular food and warmth, was beginning to tell upon her. She became more and more silent, and even in Clifford's presence found no temptation to resume her natural liveliness.

Erskine in these days was becoming increasingly bitter. Once, upon her venturing to push her conviction as to the expediency of offering some of her work for acceptance at the Spring Art Exhibition, he had been angry with her almost to violence.

And Walter? Walter's visits were becoming fewer as well as shorter; twice within the past week he had sent her a note excusing his absence. On Sunday mornings he always called and went with

her to church; the rest of the day was passed by her in alternate reading, fire-stirring, and nightmare reflections. And so the winter passed.

It was a cheerless morning in the early spring. People's faces looked blue and nipped with the damp chill as they hurried along. There were very few abroad whom hard necessity was not driving. Now and then would come a hardy young tradesman, — one of the collarless, whistling variety, who habitually defy the temperature with impunity. But even these seemed to have been awakened against their will, and passed silently along, with hardly more swing to their usually active arms than was necessary for easy locomotion. Sophy climbed the long flights of stairs, — longer and dimmer than ever, they seemed to her, with the prints of countless footsteps marked over them in thin, chocolate-colored slime.

As she passed along the corridor which led to her room she saw Erskine in the act of unlocking his door. He paused as she approached him, and raised himself to speak to her.

"You are early," was his quiet greeting.

The sight of him gave a fresh impulse to those past reflections which were connected with him. If she dared speak frankly to him! "I came early purposely," she said, hesitating and blushing.

"And I," he said, as quietly as before, — so quietly, indeed, that it drew her attention, — "I have very much to do this morning."

"You are making preparations already to leave, are you not?" she asked, in a voice which trembled a little.

He looked at her and smiled sadly; then he bent

to the low knob and threw open his door. "I am to go," he answered, in a manner most unlike his own, — "I am to go very soon now; I wish to leave everything as it should be."

The pain of repressed tears was in her throat, and she could not speak. "Is there anything that I can do for you?" he asked, observing her hesitation.

She hurried past him and to her room. "Nothing, nothing," she answered, quickly. "I know what to do to-day."

Then his door closed, and she was alone. She removed her outer wraps, and seated herself idly at the window. The room was stiflingly hot. The little spindle-legged radiator, which could not be induced to bestir itself if the weather were windy or freezing, was always violently active in a moderate or damp season. She threw up the window and rested her head against the dusty sash. She could hear footsteps in the next room, and sometimes faintly the sharp sound of tearing papers or the moving of heavy objects. So he was going, and without her! Then her mind dwelt upon the great change in his manner toward her, and she wondered at it. How lonely he was! How often must he have felt the heaviest sadness, and borne it in solitude! She had been accustomed to regard him as a machine, without sentiment or real affection. But the last weeks had shown him to her in a different light, and his few words this morning had transferred him from his isolated position in her mind to a place among his human fellows. "Perhaps he has made as many mistakes as I," she thought, "and now he is sorry for it all." And thus reminded of her own affairs, she devoted

herself tearfully to them, and forgot all else in the sharpness of regretful retrospect and dreary outlook.

The morning was half gone when Clifford Lanman presented himself.

"You did not want me, perhaps," he said, rather ruefully, observing her distress, and considerably awed thereby.

"No," she admitted, shortly, "I did not want you." Then, seeing him quite taken aback, and about to depart, she repented her ungracious words, and added, more kindly, stretching forth a detaining hand as she did so, "Stay, stay, if you will; I am not busy, — at least I was only crying; I was very busy over that."

He stopped in embarrassment. "I saw it," he said; "I was sorry."

His ready sympathy touched her. "I believe that I did want you, after all," she said, drying her eyes and rising. "I am certainly tired enough of myself, and I cannot work. Oh, it is such a dreadful day! Do you know what I mean? Did you ever have the blues in all your life?"

He had seated himself upon the lounge, removing neither his coat nor gloves, as he usually did without invitation. "Of course I have had the blues," he answered, promptly; "I have them now. 'Nothing is true but two and two; and the color of all the world is drab!' That is not original," he added, with a quickly banished smile, "still, it is very good."

His own bright manner was shining through the sympathetic gloom under which he had made a pretence of hiding it. Yet he did not look at her, but directed his gaze away, toward the window,

where the latter clause of his quotation seemed amply substantiated.

His consideration warmed her heart still more toward him. It was like a little beam of sunlight through the fog.

"Clifford Lanman," she exclaimed, impulsively, "you have a positive genius for two extremely rare accomplishments. One is the power to be always in good spirits, and the other the ability to mind your own business. Why did not you ask me what I was crying about?"

"Why should I? Life is an uppy-and-downy affair, — more uppy than downy as a general thing; so that a few tears more or less should not surprise us. Am I right? Ah, you can still smile! That is what I want to see. Now I can go in peace."

"Go!" she echoed, in displeased surprise, "why, where are you going? You have just come."

He arose and walked uneasily about the room. "The truth of the matter is this," he said, after a short pause. "Willard Merle invited me to-day to go home with him and spend a week or two. On the spur of the moment I said I would go, and would meet him at the noon train. Ever since I said it I have been sorry. And if there is anything that I can do for you, it will be excuse enough to get out of it."

The whole weight of that miserable sense of friendlessness and failure had rolled back upon her heart.

"Of course there is nothing that you can do for me," she answered, sadly; "no one can do anything for me. You must go; and what is more, you ought to start at once."

"Oh, no! my bag has gone down. You are sure that you do not want me? For two words of encouragement I will telegraph Merle and stay."

She would not let him see how heartily she longed for his companionship. What right had she to stand in the way of his enjoyment? There was a luxury of wretchedness in the thought that she should be still more wretched.

"You baby!" she said, laughing scornfully at him. "Of what use could you be to any one in the world, I wonder! You always seem to me like a little bit of a child just learning to toddle. Really it is time for you to go."

"I know it; for that very reason it has just begun to be fun to stay. You called me a baby, I think?"

"I did, I did; and that is what you are. You will lose your train. Will you go?"

"Indeed I will. Farewell. You shall not see me again until I am older."

After he had gone, she resumed her seat at the window, and waited sadly until the silence in the next room was broken by the sound of footsteps. At the same time the earliest of the differently opinioned bells and whistles about the city began to give notice of the hour of noon.

Sophy's head was heavy with the long hours of tears and inaction which she had passed. She arose and resumed her street attire. She could not eat, but she would go into the outer air and walk about for an hour; that would do her good.

As she passed Mr. Erskine's door he came into the passage, evidently attracted by the sound of her key. He looked dusty and tired, but he smiled as she paused in passing.

"You are going to your luncheon now?" he asked her, more pleasantly than she had ever heard him speak.

She replied in the affirmative.

"How soon do you expect to be back?"

"In an hour, or half an hour," she answered; "or I could be back much sooner."

"No, no," he said, in his positive manner; "I only wanted to tell you that I expect to be particularly busy for the rest of the day, and to ask that if any one should come to my door during the afternoon, you would take the message, or whatever it may be, and keep it for me until to-morrow; that is all. Good-by."

He waited for a minute before he turned again into his room, as if thinking whether there might not be something further that he should wish to say. Then he repeated his good-by and that unaccustomed smile, and withdrew.

In the street, where strangers were so numerous, the sense of loneliness overwhelmed Sophy more forcibly than ever. Erskine's smiles and gentle speech were the only occurrences within the week to which she could look back with pleasure; and then, with an exciting rush came to her once more the thoughts which she had banished. She would go with him to Germany, and spend her life there! A new beginning, away in the untried world! She hailed the idea now with as much joy as a criminal might.

In fancy she had lived an idealized life of labor, and died serenely upon her accumulated laurels, surrounded and lamented by all those who had opposed her, when she was aroused by the sensation of hunger


to the fact that she had been already an hour in the murky street. As she returned to the little restaurant, she grew with every step to regard the fact of her departure as more certain. She would not lose an unnecessary minute in speaking to Erskine and telling him of her decision. The silent warnings and admonitions which had before battled against the project were drowned now, or abashed into utter stillness by the power of the new resolve. She could eat but little, despite her hunger, so anxious was she to consult with him who should be her future guide. But as she paused at his door a little later, she remembered the wish which he had expressed that he might not be disturbed that afternoon, and thrilled as she was with the excitement of the decision, she dared not break in upon him then. She knew that for him her story would possess but a mixed interest. He cared for nothing now, for her always least of all. Upon this subject she would talk with him only under the most favorable circumstances. There was nothing for it but to wait until he should leave his room at the close of the day, and then waylay him and impart her information. It was already after one o'clock. He would surely not remain later than five. She must be patient.

She unlocked her door with more noise and delay than was strictly necessary, hoping, although vainly, that he might hear her and come to her with some forgotten wish or instruction. Then she settled herself with what resignation she might to dispose of the time before her. She piled together all her sketches and studies, the canvases by themselves, and those upon paper by themselves; she packed her colors and brushes carefully, and destroyed waste odds

and ends which had accumulated since her occupancy; she exchanged a few words with a messenger who knocked persistently at Erskine's door, and seemed disappointed at being obliged to go away without gaining admittance; then, later, the postman arrived, willingly giving up his charge to her.

And now it was after three o'clock. Everything was done that she could think of to do, and there was still a possible hour or hour and a half during which she might be obliged to wait. She tried to read; but finding that she understood nothing of that which she read, gave up the attempt and went to the window, to seek a possible interest without.

The sky was still dark and gray overhead; but there was a little cold yellow light away toward the west, against which groups of factory chimneys were sharply defined, with black smoke rising solidly from their different tops, and stretching away upon the wind in long, dissolving clouds. The sun itself was so thickly covered that a kind of ghostly twilight had already begun to fall. As four o'clock struck, Sophy became desperate. She was still in doubt as to the wisdom of disturbing her neighbor; but surely he would consider that she had waited long, and forgive her interruption. Still another half hour had gone before she could muster courage of a sufficiently enduring nature to support her in knocking at his door, and then all that her bravery could produce was a faint tap, to which there was no response; and frightened at her temerity, she returned hastily to her own room. After a little time she reassured herself, and started again toward those forbidden panels, to which her reluctant knuckles applied




themselves now more forcibly. After two or three attempts the unwelcome thought came to her that possibly he had already gone. Yet how could that be, when she had been listening for his footsteps so anxiously all through the afternoon?

It was growing darker. The type-writing woman, in sad-looking garments of a color to match the atmosphere, glided past the distant end of the corridor like a phantom, and disappeared down the stairs on her way from her day's work.

After a disheartened pause, during which Sophy confirmed her fears that Mr. Erskine was indeed gone, she turned the knob of his door as a departing assurance, when to her surprise she discovered that it was not locked. As she reclosed it in alarm, the key, which had been left in the lock on the inside, was dislodged, and fell to the floor with a noise which startled her overwrought sense of hearing. Again she crept into her own room. "I am like Bluebeard's wife," she thought, trying to reassure herself.

She put on her hat and wraps, and locked her own premises securely from intrusion. Once more at his door she hesitated, but only for an instant. Then with a scorn of herself and a noisy bravado by way of encouragement, she threw it quite wide, that the fading light from the window might fall before her upon the key. A heavy portière hung within the doorway, making a little ante-room, and serving to cut off the view of passing outsiders, while allowing to those within, the luxury of an open door and a draught. With another pang of fear, which she might despise, but could not overcome, she stepped forward and drew the curtain partially aside upon its rings.

A moment later the remaining occupants of the half-deserted building were startled by the wildest, most piercing shriek which had ever sounded through its common-place walls. Even passing persons on the street heard that fearful cry, and hurried within and above, to join others in whose ears it had sounded yet nearer and more terrible. And so they came, an ever-increasing crowd, guided, by those who had heard it nearest of all, to the artist's studio, where just within the doorway lay the figure of an insensible young woman; while near the window was stretched that object, the very sight of which had stunned her, — the body of a man lying upon its face, with arms thrown forward, and beyond the hands the small, innocent-looking weapon which, grasped in those now stiffening fingers, had sent death to that brain and brought about that ghastly head the glassy black pool which hid its dreadful red in the depth of the gathering gloom.



CHAPTER XXI.

A BUSINESS call had again obliged Walter Ver-
rick to absent himself from town. But on the
evening preceding his departure he had sought an
interview with his aunt, as a result of which that
lady haunted Sophy's apartment all through the late
afternoon during which the niece whom she ex-
pected was listening in vain for the footstep of the
dead artist. Mrs. Hurlingham's mission was to ef-
fect a reconciliation with Sophy. Not that she was
ready to acknowledge herself in the least degree
wrong; never in the whole course of her life had
an action of her own appeared to her in any but a
justifiable light. Still, she was ready to withdraw
opposition or remonstrance, and live as pleasantly as
might be, if Sophy would but return to her nominal
protection.

As the afternoon wore on, Mrs. Hurlingham be-
came provoked, then angry; and finally, thoroughly
alarmed, she hurried home to rehearse her fears to
her husband, and direct him as to the course to pur-
sue for her peace of mind. She was not altogether
without comfort in the idea that Sophy might have
returned to the country by the afternoon train; but
she arrived at home only to have this possible case
proved to be impossible, and her fears the more
aroused.

Mr. Hurlingham had been at the station to meet the very train which Sophy must have taken, had she returned to her sister. He was expecting some harness, and had been to receive it. He had waited some minutes for the train to arrive, and he was sure that no one of the few chilly occupants of the waiting-room bore the least resemblance to Sophy Verrick.

"She may have waited on the platform," his wife suggested, "or she may not have been obliged to wait at all."

"She was not there," he asserted, stoutly; "I should have seen her. I left the room myself as soon as the train was in sight, and stood out there talking to Merryman about the harness until it left. They have disappointed me again," he added, reminded of his own grievance. "They say now that it will be here on Tuesday. If it comes then, I will take it; if it does not, they may keep it, — I shall look elsewhere; and so I wrote Giles this afternoon."

"I do not care about your harness," cried his wife, sharply. "Cannot you see that I am worried to death about Sophy? You must do something."

Mr. Hurlingham stared. It was the first time within his married experience that he had received so indefinite an order as this. His wife must be indeed overcome with anxiety when her quick brain could leave to another a decision as to action in a crisis. Placed in so unaccustomed a position, he had not a shadow of a course to suggest.

"Have you been to her studio?" he asked.

"No; I might have done so earlier, but it would be useless now. There is no way of lighting the place, and she would not stay there in the dark."

"I cannot see why you should be troubled," he remonstrated. "Sophy is too old to lose herself or allow herself to be run over."

"What nonsense!" exclaimed his wife, contemptuously. "I never considered her quite an idiot. Of course I know that she is safe somewhere, but I must know where."

"A great strong girl," Mr. Hurlingham went on, still clinging to such consolation as there might be in his first idea, since he could think of none better, "twenty years old, and perfectly able to take care of herself!"

As he was so continuing, his arguments were cut short by the unceremonious exit of his audience from the room. The sharp rattle of cab-wheels in the street had ceased at some curb near by, and almost immediately thereafter the door-bell sounded through the house.

Mrs. Hurlingham tore open the door and confronted Sophy's limp figure and white, terrified face. There was another behind her, that of a man. Mrs. Hurlingham's first agonized thought was that her niece had, through some headstrong imprudence, brought herself within the grasp of the law. Before a word of explanation could be spoken, however, Sophy staggered into the hall and dropped, speechless and senseless, upon the floor.

Sophy was conveyed to her proper destination through the instrumentality of a Mr. John Greenshields, one of those impecunious lawyers whose door she had passed and re-passed so frequently on the way to her room. Mr. Greenshields did not know even her name; but before he had been three

minutes in possession of such facts as he was able to gather without leaving the side of the young lady, he caused to be summoned all the necessary functionaries, and also took upon himself the responsibility of entering the studio which he knew to be hers, and ascertaining and corroborating her address by the time that it was needed.

At Mr. Hurlingham's house he was still in attendance, where he held himself ready to relate the story when the time for explanation should arrive. Meanwhile he introduced himself to Mr. Hurlingham, and remained with him during the hurry and confusion above stairs, in which neither had part, while footsteps flew, doors opened and shut, messengers departed, and doctors arrived and took possession.

Mr. Greenshields was a tall, decided-looking man, wearing a shiny suit of clothes, a waistcoat with frayed binding, a ready-tied cravat upon which time had pressed a warning finger, and a pair of boots which, although of high lustre, showed many a suspicious little rift. His name appeared in full upon the card which he presented; and the fact that he was an attorney and counsellor-at-law was bracketed with his business address in small characters in one corner.

Mr. Hurlingham was completely dazed by the occurrence of the afternoon. He would not question Mr. Greenshields himself, but begged that gentleman to reserve whatever he had to tell until Mrs. Hurlingham should be at liberty. The two men dined *tête à tête*, — Mr. Hurlingham nervously and sparingly; Mr. Greenshields with self-possession and an economical enjoyment of that which might not soon

fall in his way again. They had left the table, and returned to the library before Mrs. Hurlingham made her appearance. She was now to be seen at her very best. It was a relief to know and battle with the worst; and as the worst proved to be only that her wayward niece, in no danger of death, must remain for some time forth quiet and unresisting under her control, Mrs. Hurlingham felt herself strong to cope with any further complications, however unexpected.

She bowed to Mr. Greenshields upon receiving his card from her husband; and seating herself directly opposite the chair from which he had arisen, interrogated him closely and exhaustively.

"I am to telegraph for my nephew in the morning," she said, when she had all the facts in her possession. "He is the young lady's brother, and he will take pleasure in thanking you for all that you have done. My husband and I are also extremely grateful to you. Good evening." Then she arose to dismiss the willing witness.

Mr. Greenshields coughed. This was not exactly what he had expected.

"If there is anything further that I could do?" he ventured to say. "The suicide will have to be investigated. If Miss Verrick is not able to appear, I might—"

"The young lady will certainly be unable to appear," Mrs. Hurlingham interrupted, with freezing impersonality. "Mr. Hurlingham will consult his lawyer if necessary. Good evening."

When Aunt Sophronia had decided upon a course of action, a much more able practitioner than Mr. Greenshields might have been accounted blameless

in discomfiture. He retired without making trial of one further remark ; and going, he was for the time as completely forgotten, he and his card and his timely services, as if they had never existed, — although Walter did subsequently call upon him, and so serviceably testify his gratitude that had it not been for a habit of periodical spreeing which the lawyer seemed unable to overcome, he might have built up a very comfortable little practice from this first case to which he had called himself.

The horrors of suicide are by no means new. One hears or reads of them with a frequency which, unless under exceptionally sensational circumstances, scarcely touches the imagination in search of a thrill. But to those personally connected with either the victim or the fact, there is nervous sensation and to spare thenceforth.

All the little party who had discovered the fact of Erskine's death had related each his own version of the story, once officially, and privately nobody knows how many times, — all save one, who had paid out the last atom of her strength in the cry which had alarmed them, for whom time had been temporarily obliterated as completely as for him who had done with it forever.

Sophy's youth and strong constitution were gradually overcoming the shock which she had suffered, and a return to regular, careful living was increasing the rapidity of her improvement. But for many weeks her nerves resisted every effort to quiet them. She had but to close her eyes to pass again in imagination through that ordeal which had been so terrible in its reality. She made not the slightest reference to the past, and her belongings were collected from

her lodging and studio without eliciting from her one question as to who had undertaken the service or how it had been accomplished.

Aunt Sophronia summoned a force about her. Jessie was sent for and arrived, involving the appearance also of Mr. Wynne, devotedly hovering and lavishly prodigal of fruit and flowers. There was Walter to spend all his spare time with his sister, to shield her name from publicity and herself from the possibility of investigating intrusion. With Walter was Mr. Hurlingham, and with them Clifford, — an untiringly anxious, sympathetic band. Besides these there were Mrs. Hurlingham's own circle of friends who had heard the story, and their friends who were interested, together with others who had no claim to information, however slight, save a hungering for food wherewith to satisfy their curiosity. Altogether, for an obscure young woman who had considered herself to be valueless and without friends, Sophy's sensational experience created a mighty stir in many ranks of society; and her subsequent condition of health was a subject of interest among a wide-spread number of her fellow-creatures.

She spoke but once or twice of Erskine's death, and then to Walter only. "I must forget that he died so," she said, earnestly.

"Forget it all," her brother urged.

"I shall never forget *him*," she answered, sadly. "He was one of the few people in the world who meant exactly what he said, and nothing more. No one understood him as well as I."

She was looking forward into her life as to an untried experiment.

"Perhaps I may go back and be my old self when I am well again," she mused; "I wonder if it will be so."

"Not to live apart from us all," said Walter, quickly. "I have tried to let you do that which you thought would make you happy, and it did you harm; I cannot consent to it again."

She laughed. "Do not be afraid," she said; "my ambition is all gone. Some one will have to take care of me as long as I live; and as you will probably be the one to do it, you should think several times before you rejoice."

"I expect — I wish to do it. Have I not always wished it?"

"You may want to marry some one by and by. What shall you do then with a spinster sister?"

"I shall smother her, of course. But I do not mean to marry; I intend to be a desirable bachelor, one of those who is looked up to and treated to the best that the different branches of his adoring family can supply. Do you see?"

"I see; we are to fawn upon you for the sake of your hoarded wealth. I agree to begin at once."

Walter laughed as he held her thin hand against his face. "That sounds like your old self," he said, lovingly. "You cannot imagine how enchanting it seems to me."

"Unless I talk nonsense I am not myself, am I? But, Walter, you have been almost hating me for the last few months. Did you realize it? Did you know that you hardly even looked at me when you spoke to me, and stayed with me such a little, little time? You cannot imagine how enchanting it seems to *me* to have you actually come and stay with me

and like to stay. I am so glad that you did not learn to despise me so thoroughly that you could not get over it."

"I have never had one thought of you which was not affectionate," he answered, quickly; "I did not want to take you away from the life which you had chosen, because I thought that when you had seen the mistake of it for yourself, it would be better for you. But you were very persevering. Sometimes I dared not go where you were, for fear that the sight of your poor little face would make me forget my resolution not to interfere with you. Do you understand it now?"

"Yes," she answered, with a sadness which warned him of the advisability of changing the subject; "I understand you now."

Aunt Sophronia hovered about her niece with tears as she beheld her thin cheeks and hollow eyes; but the submissiveness of the patient was certainly a most gratifying change. Sophy agreed without question to every proposition which her aunt might make as to diet, rest, or clothing.

"Am I not an angel, Aunt Sophronia?" she said one day, laughing over an especially unpleasant tonic which she swallowed according to request. "Make the most of me now, for I may backslide when I am better! Who can tell?"

Mrs. Hurlingham received the empty glass with satisfaction. "'Sufficient unto the day—'" she said, amiably. "You are a great deal better than you were."

"I know I am better than I *was*, but I want to be better than I *am*, and see how it seems. Do you think that you shall like me then?"

"That depends," said Aunt Sophronia; but her laugh had a touch of fondness in it.

In course of time, by Sophy's request, Clifford was admitted to see her.

Like the others, he was not proof against the pathos of her changed looks, and exerted himself especially to please her and make her forget all painful memories. He told her how Mr. Wynne had remodelled his domain with a view to the proper reception of a bride, and how he and Lanman had repaired, altered, and reorganized until there remained no further possibility of improvement. Lanman, especially, was so completely interested in the arrangements that he spent all his time in personally overseeing them. Sophy had inquired for him, timidly; but when told that he had left town she had not asked again.

"He would come up if he thought that he could see you, I know he would," Clifford assured her. "I will telegraph him if you like."

"No, no; not for a thousand worlds," she said, quickly, — "he is so busy. Perhaps I may see him by and by."

And there the matter rested, and Lanman still remained invisible.

Clifford, on the contrary, was unremitting in his attentions. He had resolved that he would be on good terms with Aunt Sophronia whether he could or no, and in the face of all accounts which came to him as to the difficulty, not to say impossibility, of the undertaking. He hardly allowed himself in her presence to express any opinions at all, but ventured his few remarks in a manner so entirely foreign to his own that Sophy was much amused.

"You must not give me any more flowers," she said, bringing to bear the threat she knew to be the most availing. "Aunt Sophronia thinks you extravagant."

"Did she say so?"

"Yes, she said she hoped that you were not running into debt."

Clifford enjoyed her delight as she buried her face in the violets which had provoked her remonstrance. He shrugged his shoulders with a laugh.

"Aunt Sophronia is like the rain," he said; "she falls alike upon the just and the unjust. Some day I shall rebuke her."

"You rebuke her!" she exclaimed, laughing; "you are demoralized at the very sight of her. When she is about, you make me think of a little rubber doll."

"Is it possible that you do not understand that?" he exclaimed. "That is charm of manner!"

"Oh! is it, indeed?"

"Yes. You see I have no Aunt Sophronia, although I have learned that no fellow is complete without one. When I employ this charm which you so flatteringly describe, I am hoping to be adopted into the family. My time is coming, you will see!"

One day a hyacinth and a tulip, tied firmly together with a ribbon, was left for Miss Verrick at Mrs. Hurlingham's door. No word came with the token; but the description of the messenger and the appearance of the nosegay left no room for doubt that it was Mary Lizzie. Nothing which Sophy had seen since that dreadful time brought back to her the memory of her former loneliness as did this remembrance from her humble little friend.

"Why could not I see her?" she asked, holding the gay blossoms tenderly. "Perhaps she spent money for these, — her poor little money; all to please me! If she comes again, Aunt Sophronia, I must see her."

Sophy's departure from town was being delayed until her aunt's especial physician should approve her removal from his care. Sophy found his judgment exasperatingly slow. Home meant all happiness for her. It was to be home for such a very little time longer. She was aware that she realized this much more sharply now than she should be able to do when she had again become resident there as of old. She grudged every day that she must lose from the few remaining during which a home was still her own.

One afternoon, while she was still awaiting her freedom, Mrs. Buxton's name was brought her. Aunt Sophronia was always inclined to refuse admission to any caller connected, however remotely, with that period which she would have her patient forget; but on this occasion Sophy's wish prevailed.

Poor Mrs. Buxton could not restrain her tears at finding herself in the bodily presence of this heroine of the late sensation. At sight of her ready emotion Aunt Sophronia was indignant. "I must ask you," she said, with a directness which evidently alarmed the caller past all further inclination to tears, "not to act in that way here. If you cannot help it now, go home and stay until you can."

Sophy was sorry for her friend. "You were very good to come and see me," she said; "I have often wanted to know how you were, — you and the boys."

"We are well," ventured poor Mrs. Buxton, in a still, small voice, with a glance in Mrs. Hurlingham's direction to make sure that she had not again overstepped a boundary.

Sophy wished for her sake that Aunt Sophronia could find it in her heart to occupy herself elsewhere; but Mrs. Hurlingham was mounting guard in a distant easy-chair, with her Penelope's web of an afghan still in process.

"You must tell me all about yourself," went on Sophy, trying to reassure her caller. "Has any one taken my room yet?"

"Yes, a gentleman has it; but we all would rather a thousand times that it was you."

Aunt Sophronia coughed warningly, and Mrs. Buxton resumed an alarmed silence.

"And Miss Farley and Miss Gibbs, are they well?" persisted Sophy.

"Oh, yes, 'm, they're very well indeed; and Miss Gibbs, Miss Gibbs — oh, no, Miss Farley! — she's writing a book, and it's to be about — I don't remember what it's about, because it is n't all written yet, you know; but when it has succeeded she is going to give up teaching and be famous. Dr. Mack says he always knew she could write a book, because her eyes are so bright, she seems to see through everything. And sure enough she says she finds it as easy as can be."

Mrs. Buxton's discourse was interrupted by startled pauses, lost threads, and sudden, confused resumings. While trying her best to appear at her ease, she was evidently thoroughly uncomfortable.

"How is Mary Lizzie?" Sophy inquired, pursuing her assisting catechism.

"Mary Lizzie is as quick as ever. Her mother is thinking of sending her to school — yes — Mr. Mount, — you remember him? — he is the quiet gentleman — he said it was a shame, and her mother is willing; so I am going to have a cousin of hers — she does n't live here now, but we shall send for her. I do not care for that way myself, because if you do not like her when she has come, there you are!"

"And there *she* is," suggested Sophy, laughing.

Mrs. Buxton glanced in terror over her shoulder. What would be done to her if the patient laughed?

"Yes, 'm," she said, meekly; "but I would n't stand in the way of her learning something. Perhaps I had better go."

Sophy had not the heart to prolong such suffering, so she offered no opposition to her visitor's proposed departure, making up for the lack of that civility by escorting her herself to the outer door and sending kindly messages to the boys and to Mary Lizzie.

After she had returned to her sofa, her aunt descended upon her with fresh tonic.

"If I had had the least idea what kind of a woman that was, you should not have seen her," she said, severely, folding her arms and waiting for the glass. "As it is, I will not have any more of these people about you. I shall speak to the doctor to-morrow, and tell him that you will be better off down in the country."

CHAPTER XXII.

SOPHY was once more at home, — at home with Aunt Sophronia and Jessie, with Augustine and visiting dressmakers, with accumulating wedding preparations and Taddy, the pug, a recent love-gift to Jessie, with a tail like a hard knot, and an impertinent leaf of a tongue always in sight. Taddy might have been regarded as a mixed blessing to uninterested observers. He was a valuable, delicate creature, and his diet was a matter requiring the closest attention. Yet he was a naughty little dog, and would steal and make himself ill, were the least liberty allowed him. Then, too, the efforts of the entire family were required to save him from the wrath of Noah, whose majesty he frequently insulted, and who longed to set a mark upon him which should admonish him to respect his elders.

Since venturing so near to isolation, a longing for popularity had taken possession of Sophy, and she was more than pleased with attentions which she had never before known how to appreciate. She found much happiness in her new endeavors to be liked, though times of depression would come, and struggles against the memories which haunted her, — weary ups and downs of a nervous convalescence.

Mrs. Frost had called upon Sophy several times alone, and once, by request, accompanied by the

boys, who appeared with the stately General in their train.

"He is ours again now," Roger explained, resting a small hand upon the dog's great head. "Miss Griswold did not want him any more after we painted him. We were glad of that. It would hardly come off."

And indeed a November sunset tint still lingered upon the General's massive flank, substantiating his little master's words.

One afternoon, having passed the morning at her needle under the direction of the dressmaker, Sophy walked out alone across the fields and along the river-path. She felt no further inclination to sketch. The very sight of her portfolio brought back to her mind with renewed force her failure, the memory of which had never haunted her so persistently as it had done to-day."

"Oh! if I had not said so much about success," she thought.

Had not every one of her friends known of her ambition? Would they not all set her down in their minds as defeated?

She looked at the river. Being sorer of mind and heart than usual, she had taken the path which she knew and loved the best. It had been the thought of it, —alone, peaceful, waiting for her, which had tempted her from the house. This was the very path where she had, half in fun, told Lanman of her intention to drown herself, should her life prove worthless to her; and here was the day of its worthlessness already come.

Lanman! At the thought of him a weight of misery seemed to roll over her like a wave. She

had wounded him, she had driven him away from her, and she should never be able to tell him that she had repented her rashness. Perhaps he would not even come down to the wedding for fear of meeting her, — for fear that she might again offer him rudeness. Or perhaps he had forgotten all about her! What if she were to recall herself to his mind?

She leaned far over toward the friendly river, which might hide her forever if she but dared. Alas, it would hide her whether she dared or no! She had ventured too far over the edge of the bank, which crumbling gave way beneath her feet, and after an instant of terror the blinding, suffocating water closed over her head.

In wordless throbs of incalculable swiftness, thoughts of the saddened faces of those at home passed before her. They would never know that she had not brought this crowning grief purposely upon them. And Walter, who loved her, and whom she had so often saddened! Oh, she could not die, she must not die and leave him so!

As she rose to the surface for the first time, she threw up her arms blindly, and the fingers of one of her hands chanced to touch among the roots which penetrated the overhanging bank above her. With a drowning clutch she grasped them. They were slender, thread-like things; but she found that by their aid she could keep her head above the water. So intense was her anxiety to live that it displaced all fear in her mind. She must not struggle, she must get her breath gently and save her strength. She dared not weigh too heavily upon her slender hold; it would be impossible for her to draw her-

self by it up on to that high bank. If she could but reach a point a few yards farther along where the boats were kept! for there the bank had been stripped of bushes, and was sloping for a short distance.

Gently she dragged herself through the water, all the life within her alert in the most intense longing for its preservation; now wounding herself upon a heavy root, now pushing aside a dead and floating branch, until she was able to rest her arms upon the solid earth and draw her body on to the thin high grass.

Aunt Sophronia's nature was not one which took comfort in alarming retrospect. If Sophy had been in danger of drowning, she was safely out of it, and there was no use in tormenting herself with that which might have been.

"What will you do next, child?" she said, dragging forward a rug for her niece to stand upon.

"I do not know, Aunt Sophronia," answered Sophy, meekly dripping; "but I know that I shall not do that again. Taddy, if you do not stop goggling your eyes at me so, you will lose them altogether."

Ah, how comfortable everything was here at home, — so bright, so light, so cheerful! How could she have been sad? Happiness was not in doing great things, but in living. Only to live was in itself a delight; even at its poorest it was lovely, — and she, how rich she was!

When she was once more dryly clad, she astonished her aunt by catching her in her arms and kissing her with all her might.

"I will never let you go, Aunt Sophronia," she said, "unless you kiss me and say that I am the very nicest niece you ever saw. Think! Am I? Think hard! Now tell me,—you have thought enough."

Aunt Sophronia laughed. "Then I will stop," she said.

"No, but, Aunt Sophronia, listen to me. I am going to reform!"

"You? Never!"

"Yes, I am; I have reformed already."

Mrs. Hurlingham laughed heartily. "Did you develop all this excellence in the river? If so, we had better throw Taddy in; he is the wickedest little wretch in the world. Stop barking, sir!"

Then, although she would not encourage sentiment in her over-nervous niece, she gave her a loving kiss or two before she left her.

Spring was already far advanced, and May was about to give place to June. More than three months had passed since Erskine's death, and Clifford Lanman was living again, with unimportant differences, such days as he had enjoyed so thoroughly in Sophy Verrick's society at the time when he had first made her acquaintance. Clifford was ostensibly staying at Frostmore; but that fact formed no obstacle to his spending his time at the Verricks', where his presence was becoming almost necessary, for Aunt Sophronia had decided that Sophy's health was not sufficiently established to admit of useful occupation, and but for Clifford's ready aid, to supply entertainment befitting her strength would have proved a difficult problem.

So together they drove in the low cart which Walter had brought for her; and when she became tired, she need only lie in her hammock under the trees and rest, with Clifford still beside her to read or talk, or even obediently to depart in search of amusement of his own that she might sleep.

One day, after a call from Mr. and Mrs. Frost and the boys, when all but Clifford had departed, she interrupted his reading with a question.

"Did they not say," she asked, suddenly, "that Miss Griswold was married?"

He look embarrassed. "She has been married for some time," he answered, shortly.

"Why did you not tell me? Were you there?"

"Yes."

"Tell me about it, then."

"What for?"

"Because I want to know. I thought you told me everything."

"And yet you have never cared to tell me everything. You have always called me a baby and sent me away."

It was the first reference, however remote, that he had made to the day which had terminated so fatally. She closed her eyes wearily, but in an instant opened them again with a little laugh.

"You will live to see the time when you will think the accusation of youth a very agreeable insult," she said. "I have reached that stage already. But tell me about the wedding, like a dear boy. Really, I want to hear about it."

"Oh, certainly! The spinster and the bachelor will now discuss the wedding. I was one of the ushers; and if you have ever been glad that you are

a young lady, continue to rejoice, for no one can turn you into an usher."

"Is it hard work?" she asked.

"Do not tell me that you have ever attended a wedding without seeing that it must be drudgery! Imagine a fellow — Shall I start there, or go back to the very beginning?"

"The beginning of your existence, do you mean?" she asked, laughing.

"The beginning of the wedding," he answered, with lofty majesty; "I am too young to have a past."

"So you are. The wedding, then; and do your very best this afternoon. Be entertaining; for I am inclined to blue dragons of the bluest kind, and I want you to fight them off for me."

"Saint George for England!" he cried, gayly.

"The fight begins. Imagine a church, large, gray, a trifle damp, perhaps; lights turned low, but over all a gala air. The chancel is decorated in its white garments, and forty million roses throw their beauty and fragrance over all, — together with potted things, of course, palms and hydrangeas, tall lilies, and miles of smilax."

"Smilax in pots?"

"No, not in pots, but everywhere else. Enormous candelabra stand about, lighted and festooned with greenery, and high above everything is a great crescent made with twinkling lights like little stars. Now, enter eight conspirators. I am one; we are the ushers. The sexton is there to admit us; the organist and a few favored friends are already in the loft. A mob besieges every one of the doors, — that is the stuffing of the assembly, so to speak.

Without them the nooks and crannies which one could not fill with invited guests would be vacant, and give the church a cheerless look which lights and flowers could not soften. Now we admit this stuffing, and it tears its component parts to shreds, trying for places from which to see. Good! The nooks and crannies are filled, and still they come. They are vandals! They stand up in the seats; they walk up each other's skirts. These are ladies, you understand, — at least they were ladies until the rumor of a wedding turned them centuries back into barbarians."

"Splendid!" interrupted his audience, laughing. "Why do you not report for the papers?"

"Too young," he answered, dryly. "I must have experience first."

"I am blighted by your sarcasm," she cried, continuing to laugh. "Please excuse me for living, and go on with the story."

"Listen, then, for the plot thickens. Now arrive the least important of the guests; how they can be so foolish as to be on time, I cannot imagine. The organist begins to play, and the stuffing mashes itself to paste. I give my stalwart arm to forty stranded dames and damsels, — no, not all at once, one after another; and they go at all sorts of gaits. By the time I have escorted my share of the witnesses, I could keep step with any animal in a menagerie. There are tall ones who stalk like the stately deer, — only it is not the deer who does the stalking; but never mind, — there are short ones who chat amiably up at me, trying to appear unconscious of the gaping crowd, and these trot like little foxes. Then there are some unaccustomed,

half-fledged ones, who are frightened, and get over the ground like a pair of dividers. But I am up with them, neck and neck, so to speak, as I turn them into their places and stroll unconcernedly back for another victim in my natural manly gait. And now they are all shown up, and a very comfortably gaudy gathering they are, with fans waving and jewels scintillating. How am I getting along?"

"Not at all, at present."

"But how was I?"

"Grandly! We had just arrived at the interesting part; I was standing on tiptoe in the hammock to see the bride come in."

Clifford nodded. "Remain in that position, if you please," he said. "The organ is playing and leaving off at its pleasure, and any ingredient of the stuffing would at this moment of excitement be willing to stand upon the forehead of its fainting neighbor to get a better view. Presently we are summoned to the vestibule; the bride has arrived. This bride has eight bridesmaids in green, and a special in pink, who walks in beside her. They all have bouquets as large as haystacks, and are positively silent with fright. Now, wraps off! Here we go! Doo-doo! Dy-doo! That is the wedding-march as performed upon the organ. It must go through that once, and then the doors are thrown back. All the people in the church turn wrong side before, and those at the sides sway forward, giving an effect of the walls falling in. We leave four pews between each two of us, and six between the last pair of bridesmaids and the bride and special. No one comes after the bride, — which is fortunate, as her dress is no less than

a mile long behind. We reach the chancel-steps. The eight maids in green slide before us eight youths in black. The bride and her special are next the rail, as per rehearsal; the groom and his best man are there to receive them. 'Wur-r-r-r!' that is the service."

"Don't be flippant," said Sophy, reprovingly.

"I give you my word that that was all I heard of it. The organ continues to play; the bride gives her haystack to the special, and 'wur-r-r,' on it goes! There is some juggling with the ring, and the bride's brother-in-law nearly dies of stage-fright as he gives her away. Now they kneel. Well done; I see the benediction! Up again; good! The organ roars its loudest, and the bride faces about without turning her train underside up, — which is the master-stroke of the performance, — and sails down the aisle, man and all, while the crowd simply grinds itself to little bits and goes home piecemeal."

"I think that you are very frivolous," Sophy commented, laughing.

"And I think that you are a monster of ingratitude! Have I not amused you and fought your blues with might and main?"

"Yes, certainly; but —"

"Do not distress yourself over my frivolity; it was a frivolous wedding. No single person there was awed, or even serious, — not one. The bride had to count the pews and look out that her train did not turn over. As for the crowd, they could hear nothing, and devoted themselves trying to see, that they might not have come entirely in vain. We had two rehearsals, and I do assure you that the service is the very least part of the whole."

Sophy reflected. "Does not it seem unfair," she said, "to think of her, splendid and successful, and then of him who died after he had helped her to become so? How can she bear to remember him?"

"She does not remember him," Clifford answered, calmly; "and when I think of it, it seems to me that she is quite right. She never would have been happy to marry except brilliantly, as she has. It ended in the only way it could end; and if Erskine cared more for her than he did for himself, he would have been as miserable with her as she with him."

"Ah, but if she had been different!"

"Exactly! If she had been different, circumstances might have been different. But she was *she*, and not to blame for it either, that I can see; and he was *he*, and too much of a fire-eater ever to enjoy himself in such a world as this. I am heartless! I know what you would say. But then," he added, throwing himself back in his chair with a sunny laugh, "but then I am so young."

She reached forth a harmless ball of a fist, and gently flattened his unresisting nose. "If you tease me again about that," she said, laughing, "I will not play with you any more. But you have cured the low spirits for this time; I am grateful for that. There is more to you, Clifford Lanman, than the careless observer might imagine."

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CHAPTER XXIII.

THE wedding-day had come, — as bright and beautiful a day as the heart of a bride could desire. It was to be a quiet wedding, such as would befit a mourning family. Still the Verricks' house overflowed with relatives from out of town, and Frostmore and the inn were filled with the friends of the groom, who, though he had not a relative in the world with which to swell the throng, yet numbered a whole army of young men among his acquaintance, scarcely one of whom was not under greater or less obligation to him. He had paid this one's debts; he had supplied the capital for that one to start in business; two thirds of them had been liberally entertained by him time after time. So they one and all offered the customary gift as a testimonial of esteem, and came down singly and in parties to the wedding. Mr. Wynne kept himself properly invisible. He had never lost one atom of his earliest animation and cordiality. His sister-in-law elect he especially delighted to honor. The plan for her future which he had mapped out within his own mind directed that she should make her home under his roof until she should marry, — which event he had grown to consider as inevitable in the life of every human being.

Sophy herself was silent upon the subject of her future, devoting her times of reflection to farewells to the home which had been hers for so many years. As it now appeared, to be sure, there was no longer any similarity to the old home about it. Her father's study, so long sacred to silence and science, had become a bower clattering with porcelain, jingling with silver and glass, — a temporary breakfast-hall, in fact. All the furniture had been removed from the other available apartments. The sitting-room was closed and locked, — there was no way of effecting a sufficiently speedy change in the character of that snugger. Three spinster cousins occupied Sophy's room, and four small beds had been placed in the dining-room proper, which was transformed into a bachelor dormitory. Only under the trees and down in the garden were things at all like themselves.

"I am glad that it is to be a quiet wedding," Sophy suggested to Clifford and Rob, looking around at the unaccustomed arrangements; "if it were to be a large and noisy one, it would not be comfortable here."

But neither Clifford nor Rob could see anything to object to in the confusion. They enjoyed rushing about under orders, and proved themselves quite invaluable in the matter of lofty decoration and incessant errand-running.

Sophy wandered down into the garden alone. It occurred to her sadly that even this was no longer Verrick property. Then her thoughts travelled to Lanman, its owner. She knew that he would be present at the wedding, and that she should see him then, if never after. For a minute it almost seemed to

her like a saving opportunity ; but then she remembered that she could hardly ask him to give back the house, or to surrender his right and allow her and her belongings to remain there. Lightly as she had always regarded the possibility of such a condition, this finding herself a vagabond upon the earth was less to her taste than any situation that she had ever known.

The wedding took place before the hour of noon. It was a simple ceremony, without unnecessary adjuncts. Only the time-honored service was read, and the same little excitements took place among expectant guests which always occur before the entrance of the bride and after her departure. The bridegroom looked stalwart and handsome, — far more so than did his best man, who was by many years his junior. The bride seemed quite a suitable selection for him, — if not in silver hair and middle-aged plumpness, yet in dignity and entire self-possession she had advanced to his state, and it became her well.

At the breakfast there was a great deal of informal hilarity. Those friends of the bridegroom who had wondered if the journey down were not almost too much of a sacrifice of comfort, ate, drank, and were of the merriest, finding it easy to persuade themselves that they would do this and more in the cause of friendship.

Among them Lanman made his appearance. As Mrs. Frost, at whose side he stood, moved forward to speak to Sophy, he hesitated. The idea of his avoiding her hurt her deeply.

“I am so glad to see you,” she said to him, with the brightest smile which she could command ; “I want to welcome you to your own house.”

Perhaps it was not altogether a felicitous remark, for on account of it, as Mrs. Frost passed on, he remained where he stood.

"I shall be obliged to be down here for some days," he said, apologetically, in a low voice; "it will be necessary to make arrangements for the care of the property. I expect to be here very little in future."

"We also shall be gone soon," she answered—"I do not like to think how soon."

"Pray believe," he returned, anxiously, "that I am in no haste to take possession. If you and your friends would remain for the present, I should be more than pleased; you should not be disturbed by any one."

"How could I exclude you from access to your own," she replied, "even if I wished to do so?"

"If you wished it," he repeated, eagerly. "Do you not wish it?"

"No," she answered, slowly and after a pause; "I do not."

During this remark his hesitating embarrassment dropped from him like a falling cloak. "I have been mistaken, then," he said, with restrained joy in his voice; "I must see you soon, — to-morrow."

When he had gone, she knew that she had said too much. His air of distant stateliness she had overcome, it was true. She had spoken as she did that she might banish its unendurable presence, and she could not question her success; but he had left her quite too happy. And the future? There was no time for thinking of that now.

On the following morning Sophy assisted at the clearance of the wrecked wedding braveries to the

very limit which her aunt and her assistants would permit.

“ ‘If seven maids with seven mops swept it for half a year, do you suppose,’ the walrus said, ‘that they could get it clear?’ ” Thus quoted Rob, hurrying along the hall with his arms full of books.

“ ‘I doubt it,’ ” returned Sophy, in answering quotation. “I have rent myself into a thousand pieces over the dining-room, and it has not made the least impression upon its appearance.”

After luncheon she undertook to rid herself of Clifford’s company, — an arrangement which he was disposed to question, having anticipated a far different event.

“You and Rob had better drive over to the lakè,” she said; “you are welcome to the cart. I do not want it; I shall be busy.”

“Busy at what? I heard from headquarters that you were to do nothing more to-day.”

“I do not mean to help about the house, but I have something else to do.”

“Oh, very well! I will go to the lake, then, since you are so exclusive; but I shall not be back by tea-time. In fact, I think that I shall probably stay all the evening. I know a young lady who is spending the summer there. It may be my fate to fall a victim to her attractions.”

Sophy laughed. “Then I hope that she will be equally smitten,” she said; “although I am afraid that that would be hardly likely.”

“Oh, you think not!” he exclaimed, seizing her wrist with dramatic *empressement*, and bending to her ear. “Listen, then. The last time I said good-

by to that young lady I might have kissed her if I had chosen. Ah, ha!"

Sophy flung him off, and started back with her hands at her ears. "Clifford Lanman," she cried, with an emphasis which, although more mirthful, equalled his own, "that is the meanest speech I ever heard from your lips."

Clifford's manner instantly became a miracle of calmness. "I did not intend to say," he averred, "that I might have kissed *her*: what I meant was that *she* might have kissed *me*. You see the difference is really very slight."

After Clifford had taken his departure with Rob, there was no longer a disturbing element; for Walter had gone to the city in the morning, to return in the early evening, and long before his arrival his sister in her hammock under the trees received her all-accommodating landlord.

If Aunt Sophronia witnessed the approach of this visitor, she did not feel called upon to appear or to interfere, for she had made up her mind that Lanman possessed qualifications which ranked him even higher than Mr. Begbie as a desirable nephew-in-law. Things were very well as they were.

Lanman seemed so light-hearted as he greeted Sophy that she felt powerless to check his joy.

"I have come to disturb you," he said, seating himself and laughing. "You do not know how I have rejoiced in the prospect."

"I am sorry," were the words which she thought were upon her lips, but she only said, "I am glad."

"And so," he said, leaning forward somewhat, as Clifford had done, and gazing into her face, "we

are here again together; and a week — two days ago — I had not an idea of it. Does it not seem as if people might be allowed the delight of knowing of happiness to come? There is so much in anticipation."

She turned hastily and sat upright. How different was this manner, which he displayed in his certainty, from the calm restraint with which he had spoken to her before and received her decision. She had not then believed that he felt so deeply; seeing it now, it frightened her. In slaying such hopes would she not in spirit, if not in act, equal Miss Griswold's self?

"When you have heard what I have to say, you will not care any more for me," she said, sadly.

"Shall I not?"

"You do not know what unwomanly things I have done in the world," she went on, trying to persuade him against her. "I shall tell you all the truth, whether you like it or not, — not because I am sure that I love you, for I am too ill-regulated to know, but because I honestly believe that you do love me, and you must not be allowed to continue. I am not worth it; indeed I am not!"

"Listen to me for one minute," he said, earnestly; "perhaps I know more of you and your thoughts than you imagine. Have I never tried to invite your confidence? Tell me. Can you not remember how I have tried to let you know that I understood you entirely?"

"You do not know one half that I shall tell you," she said to him, steadily. "Do you remember the last time that you were at my studio? You had

spoken to Walter that morning, and he was very much grieved at my conduct; my aunt too discovered it in some way, and she was furious. So I chose to think myself friendless, and I would have gone abroad with Mr. Erskine if he had not died."

"What do you mean?" he asked, quickly, the triumph in his eyes seeming to lose itself in a kind of startled wistfulness.

"He never liked me personally," she said; "he was terribly in love with some one else. He told me, only a few days before the last, that if I would study hard, my success would be the one thing in the world which could become a gratification to him. But he said that to accomplish that, I must give up my life here and be near him in Dresden, perhaps for years. I refused to think of it then, because I knew that no matter how properly it might be arranged, Walter would not consent to my living so far from my people for so long a time. But things grew worse with me; and although I knew that I should not have even a friend in him, that afternoon when I found him dead I had come to tell him that I had decided to spend my life alone under his teaching."

Her voice died away. She was not crying, but was in extreme excitement.

"If he had not been dead," she said, recovering herself with a shudder, "I should have been alone now. I think that he wanted me to become like him, — to have no friends nor love in the whole world. He told me that art was all, and I believed him. But he proved that to be false; he could not live himself with only art."

"And it was I," he said, in remorseful self-reproach, "through whom you were placed under the influence of such a mind! How can you ever forgive me?"

"I should never have been anything without that experience," she answered, quickly; "it showed me completely the folly of my own ideas. No person could have shown it to me by talking, for I thought that no one knew as well as I. So do not blame any one for that which has proved so fortunate. Above all, do not blame him. It was not like so strong a character as his to be so completely wrecked by one disappointment. He was morbid, and broken-down with overwork until it brought him to that dreadful end. You do not think hardly of him, do you?"

"No, I am persuaded that it was with him as you say." The reply was in words quite what she would have had it, but there was a tenderness in the tones which betrayed pre-occupation too entire to admit of great attention to any subject besides herself. As he spoke he held out both his hands towards her.

"There is one thing more," she continued, keeping her own hands tightly together and looking down at them, to avoid the temptation of his eyes. "After I came home, I fell into the river, — at least I think that I fell. You remember the place where I told you that I should drown myself? It was very near there. I thought that I did not care for life; nothing had succeeded, and you were gone—"

After all, there was no one about. Even Taddy had gone away in the train with his mistress.

"Still, do not flatter yourself," she went on, flushed and laughing; "I found that I wanted to live even with nothing. If you would like to know what it is only to have life, go and drown yourself."

Lanman's calm was not like Aunt Sophronia's. He questioned her anxiously until she came to the end.

How sharp then was his self-reproach; how demonstrative his affection!

"Have I not said enough?" she cried, in surprised reproof. "I have hidden nothing. Do you not see how weak I have been, and how little I deserve any good thing?"

"The confidence which you have had in me brings you only the nearer to me," he answered. "If I were to open my past life before you, do you think that it would show as above reproach? If you have been weak, you have been without a sympathizing guide; if you have been mistaken, your mistakes are my own, as your happiness shall be hereafter."

"And you would dare to venture after all that you know?"

"I dare to make myself perfectly happy in teaching the woman whom I love to love me. I shall surely succeed."

There was a silence. She was looking away at the redly purpling woods, and he sat gazing into her face, awaiting her next words.

"I should be cheating you," she said, at length. "Think of all that I have to gain!"

"And think of all that I *have* gained," he returned. Then he arose and lifted her to his side. "You

have said all the discouraging things that you can think of. Have you nothing pleasant to say to me? Does it not look to you like a happy future?"

"It looks to me," she answered, "like the only future for me; but I am afraid of it for you. It is a daring venture!"

"Be it so, then," he returned; "I am satisfied. However well we may love each other, we will try to bethink ourselves that we are tempting fate; however sunny our lives may be, we will remember the danger of our position. In fact, we will be as miserable as you please, if it will but be for your happiness. What you wish I shall wish. You shall be my selfishness."

So Lanman, having triumphed through force of argument and determination, pursued the same course in other affairs, and formed his plans and set forth his intentions with irresistible power and quiet, convincing enthusiasm. Walter must be the first to be told of the new prospect. Aunt Sophronia and the few still remaining cousins must also be early informed of it, that their willing fingers might not needlessly strip bare the house; for Lanman had already decided to keep the place as it stood, a rendezvous for all the family connection. There could be nothing to prevent their being married at once, he was sure. Then they would go abroad with Clifford. Would not she like that?

Sophy was borne along as upon a tide by his overwhelming delight and strength of purpose, which, having once been allowed headway, never after swerved, and through which every detail as he had set it forth was exactly carried out.

"You will never believe it," she said to him on that first evening as he sat beside her lounge, "but I positively enjoy having your way instead of my own. Why did you not insist upon it long ago, — that day at the studio? I should have listened to you if you had. I was ready to listen, I *wanted* to listen; but you were so easily dissuaded. That was a mistake."

"I was a blind idiot," he said, reflectively. "I was so sure that your answer would be what it — what it seemed to be, that the slightest confirmation of the conviction was sufficient. I dared not let you see how utterly wretched it made me."

But a third person may not intrude upon the twilight seclusion of the newly engaged; that is apt to be too literal a form of *tête à tête*, and the interloper who shall dare to break the invisible barrier will meet his just deserts in chilled and utter boredom. To you who have lived and loved, the memory of such seclusion is sufficient. To you who have not — smile now, and await the hour of your enlightenment.

It was to Clifford Lanman that the new intelligence brought greatest surprise. Sophy would allow no one but herself to communicate it to him; and on the morning following her interview with his uncle, she walked him down into the garden for the purpose.

"Clifford," she said, "can you speak French and German and Italian?"

"Oh, fluently!" he answered, with a laugh; "you cannot catch me on anything that I can point to."

"Then I think that you will do. I want to engage a good voluble courier; I am going abroad."

Clifford immediately began to whistle "*Partant pour la Syrie*" and to execute a most extraordinary dance, which, although lively, accommodated itself to the dignified measure of the air.

"You cannot guess who is to go besides," she interrupted, wishing the ordeal well over. How unsuspecting he was, obstinate boy!

"What do I care?" he said, beaming upon her. "*We* are going, — there is the fun. It does not make any difference who else there is — Aunt Sophronia, perhaps?"

"You are right," she answered, struck by a sudden idea; "your Aunt Sophronia is to go."

"So I am adopted at last, am I? What did I tell you? And our aunt is going with us! Ah! although I maintain an outward calm, yet am I inwardly delirious with joy, — as indeed," he added, looking at her narrowly, "you seem to be also."

"Oh! cannot you see," she cried, laughing, and clasping her hands nervously together, "that something perfectly tremendous has happened?"

But enjoying her anxiety that he should guess, and little suspecting the nature of her communication, he allowed himself the pleasure of trying her excited impatience by further stolidity.

"I cannot imagine what it can be," he said, in deliberate musing. "It is a pity, by the way, that Uncle Lan could not have been persuaded to go with me this time. It is luxury in earnest to travel with him. He always has the best places for everything, the best luck at being on hand for all the unusual sights, and the very best things to eat. I am sorry for your sake that he will not be with us."

And so, imagining himself to be wandering at an exasperating distance from the subject, the unsuspecting youth fell directly upon it.

"He *is* going," she burst forth, seizing the opportunity, — "he is going with me, I am going with him. Oh, Clifford, I am to be your Aunt Sophronia!"

THE END.



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